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Atheism in America

Ateismus v Americe

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Declaration

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracoval samostatně, že jsem řádně citoval všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného či stejného titulu.

I declare that the following MA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the source of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

V Praze dne

Podpis

Permission

Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the MA thesis being borrowed and used to study purposes.

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...for making me an atheist.

Summary

This diploma work analyzes the contemporary rise of the number of atheists in the United States of America, basing this presupposition on numerous nation-wide surveys, primarily conducted by Gallup Poll and Pew Research Center. It goes into depth on the definition of atheism and strictly delineates the meaning of this word and the use of its alternatives in the work. Given the fact that the thesis is written by a Czech author, it also provides necessary background covering the differences between Czech atheism and American atheism. Since the work is purposely not one of literary analysis but rather of socio-political and cultural nature, reasons for this decision are given in a separate subchapter analyzing Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood*.

History of atheism in America is touched upon in the beginning of Chapter 3, but since the fundamental focus of this work is on the contemporary state of affairs, the roots of modern atheism in America are sought after mainly in the twentieth century. In particular, the greatest causes of the weakening of church's power and the rise of secularism (or atheism, for that matter) are given as following: Madalyn Murray O'Hair's fights against church's influence in public schools and against its public funding; the argument about the non-scientific nature of belief and the general juxtaposition of science and religion; feminism; the sex abuse scandal of 2002 and other affairs which caused the church to lose its moral high ground; and last but not least the influence of media and the effects of globalization.

One other cause, which is elaborated on in its own chapter, is the movement of the New Atheism. Its historical background is traced back to the latter half of the twentieth century in order to show that there is not much which is particularly new about the movement. Subsequently, the basic features of it are described and analyzed. Finally, the effects of the New Atheist movement are considered.

The final chapter contemplates the potential future of godless America, drawing inspiration from many sources and suggesting multiple possibilities. In the end, the author suggests that the U.S. may develop in the same way the United Kingdom did, as represented in the poem "Church Going" by Philip Larkin.

Key Words

- America
- Agnosticism
- Apostate
- Atheism
- Belief
- Christianity
- Church
- Creationism
- Dawkins
- Dennett
- Enlightenment
- Faith
- Feminism
- God
- Harris
- Hitchens
- Madalyn Murray O'Hair
- Media
- Morality
- New Atheism
- Non-Believers
- Prayer
- Religion
- Science
- Secularism
- Statistics
- USA
- Youth

Abstrakt

Tato diplomová práce analyzuje rychlý nárůst počtu ateistů, který lze v současné době pozorovat ve Spojených státech amerických. Tento základní předpoklad staví na výsledcích několika celonárodních průzkumů veřejného mínění, především pak průzkumů společností Gallup Poll a Pew Research Center. V práci je detailně rozebrána definice ateismu a je přesně vymezeno užití tohoto slova, jakož i jeho různých alternativ. Vzhledem k faktu, že je diplomová práce psána rodilým Čechem, je v ní také zahrnuta pasáž popisující rozdíly mezi českým a americkým pojetím ateismu. Jelikož je práce spíše sociopolitického a kulturního rázu, než aby se zaobírala literární analýzou, jedna podkapitola osvětluje důvod tohoto zaměření, a to právě na příkladu literární analýzy románu *Moudrá krev* od americké spisovatelky Flannery O'Connorové.

Dávné dějiny ateismu v Americe, potažmo v Evropě, se sice nastiňují na počátku třetí kapitoly, jelikož však jádro této práce spočívá v současnosti, dohledávají se kořeny současné vlny ateismu především v druhé polovině dvacátého století. Nejzávažnější příčiny oslabování moci církve a rostoucí sekularizace (respektive tedy zvyšování počtu ateistů v zemi) jsou konkrétně identifikovány jako: Soudní spory Madalyn Murray O'Hairové namířené proti vlivu církve ve veřejných školách a proti církevnímu využívání peněz ze státního či federálního rozpočtu; argument o nevědeckosti náboženství a všeobecně přijímaný protiklad vědy a víry; feminismus; skandál z roku 2002 o sexuálním zneužívání dětí kněžími, jehož následkem církev pozbyla morální autoritu; a v neposlední řadě vliv médií a celkový dopad globalizace.

Další příčinou, která se rozebírá v samostatné kapitole, je hnutí Nového ateismu, jehož počátek se obvykle datuje do začátku nového milénia. V diplomové práci jsou na úvod poodhaleny kořeny Nového ateismu, které zasahují do druhé poloviny minulého století, a následně jsou rozebrány a analyzovány základní charakteristiky tohoto hnutí. Závěrem se zvažuje dopad, který toho hnutí mělo na vývoj ateismu ve Spojených státech.

Závěrečná kapitola diplomové práce rozjímá nad potenciálními podobami bezbožné Ameriky a dopadem, jaký by taková eventualita měla na společnost. Na samotném konci práce autor navrhuje, že se Spojené státy velmi pravděpodobně vyvinou stejným směrem jako kdysi Spojené království, což se ukazuje na příkladu básně „Chození do kostela“ od Philipa Larkina.

Klíčová slova

- Amerika
- Agnosticismus
- Ateismus
- Bezvěrec
- Bůh
- Církev
- Feminismus
- Kreacionismus
- Křesťanství
- Dawkins
- Dennett
- Harris
- Hitchens
- Madalyn Murray O'Hair
- Média
- Mladiství
- Modlitba
- Morálka
- Náboženství
- Nevěřící
- Nový ateismus
- Osvícenství
- Sekularismus
- Spojené státy americké
- Statistika
- USA
- Věda
- Víra

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Chapter 1 Introduction



od knows America is turning away from faith. Some observers – writers, academics as well as ordinary citizens – seem to be noticing this wave of secularization in the promised “city upon a hill”¹ which has washed over the United States particularly in the past couple of years. Others are pointing out that the serious disillusionment with (organized) religion has not been a matter of only the past couple of years but may have originated around the time of the 9/11 attacks and the series of Boston Globe spotlight articles. Others still, a miniscule minority to be sure, may even remember some earlier instances of American atheists rearing their heads and fighting for recognition.

Atheism in America is indeed not a recent occurrence. The roots of this phenomenon reach back whole decades into the nation’s past, perhaps centuries, but the truth of the matter is that in the recent years it has been decidedly picking up steam. As the Director of Religion Research Alan Cooperman and his team write in the 2015 Pew Research Center report entitled “America’s Changing Religious Landscape”, “the Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing.”² This statement may not seem to carry much weight since the majority of US population is still decidedly religious and religion as such, particularly Christianity, is very much a vital, living part of everyday American life, but it is worth noting that according to the latest surveys the religious, social, and cultural scenes in the US are changing. Now more than ever, people feel free to not take part in organized religion, to denounce God, to publically admit that they do not believe in any higher power. Oftentimes

¹ “John Winthrop’s ‘City upon a Hill’, 1630,” *Mt. Holyoke* 10 October 2016, 10 October 2016 <<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/winthrop.htm>>

² Alan Cooperman, Gregory Smith, and Katherine Ritchey, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” *Pew Research Center* 14 October 2016, 14 October 2016 <<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>>

they do not need to fear the same sort of ostracism which their predecessors from the generations past most definitely would.

As part of my research into the matter of American atheism I sent out questionnaires of my own making to a handful of my American acquaintances. Granted, all of the information I gathered in this way is purely anecdotal and would be impermissible as a proper case study, but in my opinion it provides this largely theoretical subject matter with a human touch, concretizing all of the impersonal statistical data. In the questionnaire, a young man in his early twenties living in New York named Ryan answered my question, “What do you think about the fact that the number of atheists seems to be rising in America?” in the following way: “I hope that by the time my children are grown, most of the country is atheistic. [...] Change for the better is coming, and the fairy tales about flying spaghetti monsters are coming to a welcome close.”³ He is neither shy nor afraid to share these beliefs even though he lives in a Christian-majority country in which religion plays an important role and in which disclosing such opinions would have at least raised eyebrows in the past years.

Ryan’s example is particularly apt because it gives face to the following statistical data drawn from the 2015 Pew Research Center report. As the researchers point out in the overview of the study:

The major new survey of more than 35,000 Americans by the Pew Research Center finds that the percentage of adults (ages 18 and older) who describe themselves as Christian has dropped by nearly eight percentage points in just seven years, from 78.4% in an equally massive Pew Research survey in 2007 to 70.6% in 2014. Over the same period, the percentage of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated – describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or ‘nothing in particular’ – has jumped more than six points, from 16.1% to 22.8%.⁴

One might argue at this point that the 2015 Pew Research Center report, however high the number of respondents who took part in it, is but one source, and as such it only provides limited insight into the complex matter of non-belief in America. Phil Zuckerman was certainly aware of this argument when he opened his essay “Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns” by saying, “Determining what percentage of a given society believes in God – or doesn’t – is fraught with methodological hurdles. First: low response rates; most

³ Appendix 1

⁴ “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.”

people do not respond to surveys. [...] Second: nonrandom samples. If the sample is not randomly selected [...] it is nongeneralizable. [Third:] adverse political / cultural climates.”⁵

The problem with the first two arguments is that it was not just the Pew Research Center who came to the same conclusion. The rise of atheism in America is a phenomenon which has been well monitored for at least the past couple of decades by samples of population both big and small. As Cooperman and his team observe, “All major religion surveys find that the unaffiliated share of the U.S. population (the percentage of religious ‘nones’) is growing rapidly. In the 2014 GSS, for instance, 21% of adults said that they have no religious affiliation, up from just 8% in 1990 and 5% in 1972, when the first GSS was conducted.”⁶ Even the American Religious Identification Study found that, “religious ‘nones’ grew from 8% of the adult population in 1990 to 15% in 2008.”⁷

As was already mentioned, this is no recent development either. While Ross Douthat may be writing in a hopeful tone of voice in one part of his book *Bad Religion* that, “From Puritan moralists bemoaning the eclipse of colonial virtues to confident Deists anticipating the extinction of Trinitarian belief, prophecies of Christianity’s imminent demise were already common at the beginning of our national story, and the faith’s revivals have always taken the skeptics by surprise,”⁸ even he cannot avoid observing that, “The proportion of Americans who stated they believed in God ‘without doubt’ dropped from 77 percent to 65 percent between 1964 and the 1990s, and there was a concurrent rise in the percentage who believed more uncertainly.”⁹ In this respect, Douthat’s semi-unconscious trepidations are only confirmed by the author of *America’s Most Hated Woman* Ann Rowe Seaman who, focusing this time on church attendance, writes:

Around [the 1960s], two polls, Gallup and National Opinion Research Center, indicated a decline in church attendance. In 1957, Gallup had found that 81% of Americans believed religion’s influence was growing. But during the 1960s, that belief plummeted—reaching a low of 14% in 1970. The most skeptical were people under 30 and those with college education.¹⁰

⁵ Phil Zuckerman, “Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns,” *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, Michael Martin, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 47.

⁶ “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.”

⁷ “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.”

⁸ Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion* (New York: Free Press, 2012): 278.

⁹ Douthat, 77.

¹⁰ Ann Rowe Seaman, *America’s Most Hated Woman* (New York: The Continuum Publishing, 2006): 141.

The third hurdle which Zuckerman mentions in his essay is, to reiterate, “adverse political / cultural climates.” Here, however, he is specifically talking about countries stricken with totalitarian regimes, “where atheism is governmentally promulgated and risks are present for citizens viewed as disloyal.”¹¹ The USA may have many a domestic problem and the word “totalitarian” may have been used a lot in the past couple of orange-tinted months and years, but the country is nowhere near that point. In Chapter 2 we will discuss this issue at greater length, so suffice to say for now that it is highly unlikely that even if a person was living in a place in America where atheism was not spread or seen very much, they would probably not feel so frightened by the idea of being exposed that they would not even disclose their religious status in an anonymous survey. To put it in a different way, life might be slightly uncomfortable in certain respects today for atheists living in certain areas of America, but while Susan Jacoby writes in *The Great Agnostic* that “‘atheist’ remains a pejorative to many religious Americans,”¹² it is hard to believe that the political or cultural climate would feel so adverse that it would make people lie about their non-beliefs, which would in turn make surveys about atheism untrustworthy and worthless. The rise of atheism is indubitable and the cultural shift towards a more secular American society seems unstoppable. There is one introductory point, though, which needs some immediate clarification.

1.1 Atheist Is the Word

***Bill Maher:** Faith means making a virtue out of not thinking. It's nothing to brag about. And those who preach faith, and enable and elevate it are intellectual slaveholders, keeping mankind in a bondage to fantasy and nonsense that has spawned and justified so much lunacy and destruction. Religion is dangerous because it allows human beings who don't have all the answers to think that they do.*

— Religulous, 2008

Firstly and most importantly, it is absolutely vital to discuss the matter of terminology. It is one thing to say that the number of religiously unaffiliated Americans has grown exponentially over the past couple of decades, but when we get to the nit and grit of this issue it becomes apparent that the simple lack of affiliation to any of the major world religions is not as unambiguous as it may seem. As the 2015 Pew Research Center report states, “The

¹¹ Zuckerman, 47.

¹² Susan Jacoby, *The Great Agnostic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013): epub copy with no page numbers.

share of self-identified atheists has nearly doubled in size since 2007, from 1.6% to 3.1%.”¹³ Nevertheless, atheists are not the only subgroup of the “religiously unaffiliated” population of America.

As Alan Cooperman and his team continue, “Agnostics have grown from 2.4% to 4.0%, and those who describe their religion as ‘nothing in particular’ have swelled from 12.1% to 15.8% of the adult population since 2007. Overall, the religious ‘nones’ have grown from 16.1% to 22.8% of the population in the past seven years.”¹⁴ Who exactly are these atheists, agnostics, nones, etc.? Are there any more terms which may be useful to us when talking about Americans losing and/or not subscribing to any religion or faith?

I am making a conscious decision to streamline the terminology used in this work and thus to avoid the use of the unnecessary and oftentimes frankly confusing mountain of words whose meanings and interpretations are either so close to one another or introduce so many levels of superfluous details into the matter at hand that it makes me wonder if they were perhaps created for the sole reason of being created. But before an issue can be brushed off it must be taken into account and elaborated. Let us take a closer look at some of these terms and then clearly state which words will be used on the following pages of this work, which words will not be used at all, and which words will be used interchangeably even though there are many writers and researchers who apparently would argue about the absolute necessity of keeping their meanings and their usage separate.

We shall start with the most obvious choice: the term “atheism”. As Michael Martin explains in the introductory chapter to *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, “even in the modern Western context atheism has meant different things depending on the changing conceptions of God.”¹⁵ “Different conceptions of God” does not even begin to cover the outrageous – and frequently antithetical – complexity one encounters when attempting to look a little deeper into the issue.

If one was to look up the basic definition of atheism in a dictionary, one would most often read something along the lines of it being, “a belief that there is no God”. In fact, that is the precise wording one gets from the editors of *Oxford Student’s Dictionary*;¹⁶ wording

¹³ “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.”

¹⁴ “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.”

¹⁵ Michael Martin, ed, *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007):

1.

¹⁶ Alison Waters, ed., *Oxford Student’s Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 47.

which owes a large debt to the fact that, “the concept of atheism was developed historically in the context of Western monotheistic religions, and it still has the clearest application in this area.”¹⁷ *Encyclopedia Britannica* offers a slightly more elaborate (and slightly less westernized) explanation when it’s first sentence describes atheism as, “the critique and denial of metaphysical beliefs in God or spiritual beings.”¹⁸ Michael Martin even brings in the structure of the very word “atheism” and its etymology in order to prove this point:

In Greek, ‘a’ means ‘without’ or ‘not’, and ‘theos’ means ‘god’. From this standpoint, an atheist is someone without a belief in God; he or she need not be someone who believes that God does not exist. Still, there is a popular dictionary meaning of ‘atheism’ according to which an atheist is not simply one who holds no belief in the existence of God or gods but is one who believes that there is no God or gods.¹⁹

The word “atheist” has this shape and form, though. It is a-theist, not a-theos, which means that Martin’s etymological journey is a tad misguided. As Paul Cliteur writes in his aptly titled essay “The Definition of Atheism”, “The ‘a’ [in the word atheism] is an alpha privans, it denies what follows.”²⁰ What follows is, of course, the word theism meaning that atheists do not subscribe to the central tenets of theism. Let us now inspect what theism is, then.

According to Martin, “In modern times theism has usually come to mean a belief in a personal God who takes an active interest in the world and who has given a special revelation to humans.”²¹ In and of itself, this sounds rather encouraging. It is simple and straightforward. Unfortunately, Martin continues:

So understood, theism stands in contrast to deism, the belief in a God that is based not on revelation but on evidence from nature. The God assumed by deists is usually considered to be remote from the world and not immediately involved with its concerns. Theism is also to be contrasted with polytheism, the belief in

¹⁷ Michael Martin, “General Introduction,” *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 1.

¹⁸ Kai E. Nielsen, “Atheism,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 16 October 2016, 16 October 2016 <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/atheism>>

¹⁹ Martin, 1.

²⁰ Paul Cliteur, “The Definition of Atheism,” *Journal of Religion and Society* 11 (2009): 2.

²¹ Martin, 1-2.

more than one God, and with pantheism, the belief that God is identical with nature.²²

Does this mean that the word atheism only applies to those who do not believe in a single deity – that is only those who do not believe in the Christian, Judaic, or Islamic God? That it is not really applicable to those who do not believe in any other kind of (natural) deity and any sort of higher power? Alas, Martin does not say. Instead he continues by drawing a distinction between positive atheism and negative atheism. Let us carefully follow his lead, then, and establish to what these specified terms pertain.

Negative atheism is defined by Martin, “in the broad sense [as] the absence of belief in any god or Gods, not just the absence of belief in a personal theistic God, and in the narrow sense [as] the absence of belief in a theistic God.”²³ In a way, this definition correlates nicely with the reasoning of the twentieth-century American author George H. Smith, according to which, “Atheism, in its basic form, is not a belief: it is the absence of belief,”²⁴ or even the reasoning of one of the most important nineteenth-century advocates of atheism, the British political activist Charles Bradlaugh, who wrote:

The atheist does not say, ‘There is no God,’ but he says: ‘I know not what you mean by God; I am without idea of God; the word ‘God’ is to me a sound conveying no clear or distinct affirmation. I do not deny God, because I cannot deny that of which, by its affirmer, is so imperfect that he is unable to define it to me.’²⁵

Returning to Martin and moving past the realization that in his definition of negative atheism he, for one thing, all of a sudden included the previously shunned ideas of deism and polytheism, and secondly made an remarkably uneven and unintuitive use of capitalization of the word God, we can move to the definition of positive atheism, which he defines in the following manner: “Positive atheism in the broad sense is disbelief in all gods, [and] in the narrow sense the disbelief in a theistic God.”²⁶

These explanations in and of themselves perfectly conform with the writings of Jacques Maritain, though, who in his 1947 lecture-turned-essay entitled “On the Meaning of

²² Martin, 2.

²³ Martin, 2.

²⁴ Quoted in “The Definition of Atheism,” 8.

²⁵ Quoted in “The Definition of Atheism,” 8.

²⁶ Martin, 2.

Contemporary Atheism” defined negative atheism as, “the merely negative or destructive process of casting aside the idea of God, which is replaced only by a void,” and positive atheism as, “an active struggle against everything that reminds us of God—that is to say, anti-theism rather than atheism—and at the same time a desperate, I would say heroic, effort to recast and reconstruct the whole human universe of thought and the whole human scale of values according to that state of war against God.”²⁷

For many authors, though, the very notion of positive atheism introduces a (debatably) interesting methodological obstacle: Does it not mean that whoever actively disbelieves in the existence of any sort of deity also actively believes in their non-existence? Is it not true, then, that atheism is in a way a form of belief-based ideology? A form of religion? This is exactly what the Christian existentialist philosopher and Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich claimed when he wrote that, “There is faith in every serious doubt [so] he who seriously denies God affirms Him [and therefore] there is no possible atheism.”²⁸ Other philosophers heartily disagree with this supposition, one of them being the earlier cited Paul Cliteur whose full statement reads, “The ‘a’ [in the word atheism] is an alpha privans, it denies what follows. [...] By denying what follows, you do not become identical with what follows (theism). Someone who is a-religious is simply what it says: not religious. It is not the case that by denying a religion you, by some magic trick, invent a religion of your own: the religion of irreligious or a-religious people.”²⁹ So the wheel turns; and so the pages rustle. One man’s lack of faith is another man’s religion. One man’s religion is another man’s superstition.

Whoever should think that this level of complexity is enough has clearly not seen the stacks of books and essays published on this topic. Several writers have a lot of ideas when it comes to the conception of atheism, and each and every one of them seems driven to introduce their own take on its definition; or at least to add an adjective to the word to make it extra special and thus justify their elaborating on it. We have already mentioned positive atheism and negative atheism as well as broad atheism and narrow atheism. Apart from these we could also discuss “moral atheism”³⁰ adopted by the Dutch atheist Florist van der Berg or “militant atheism”³¹, which is used to describe New Atheists the likes of Christopher Hitchens or Richard Dawkins, or “passive” and “active” atheism or “religious” and “non-religious

²⁷ Jacques Maritain, “On the Meaning of Contemporary Atheism,” *The Review of Politics* 11.3 (1949): 268.

²⁸ Quoted in John Edwards, “Religious Faith, Doubt and Atheism: Reply,” *Past & Present* 128 (1990): 159.

²⁹ “The Definition of Atheism,” 2.

³⁰ Paul Cliteur, *The Secular Outlook: In Defense of Moral and Political Secularism* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010): 40.

³¹ Victor J. Stenger, *The New Atheism* (New York: The Prometheus Books, 2009): 25.

atheism” or dozens of other types of atheism which have been introduced but whose labels never truly caught on.³² We shan’t, though. This is not that kind of work. The only other term I will introduce – only to immediately abandon it – is agnosticism.

Agnosticism is essentially a neat and comprehensive term for, “I do not know if any God or gods exist, and frankly I do not care very much,” or as Paul Cliteur puts it:

The agnostic usually claims to leave open the question of whether or not God exists. Agnosticism is the theory according to which things within a specified realm cannot be known. Although that specified realm is not necessarily religion, the term is usually applied in religious context, more particularly with reference to the existence of God.³³

The terms atheism and agnosticism embody the two sides of the same coin, one exclaiming about the existence of God or about religion in general, “I do not think that is true,” while the other is more cautiously claiming, “Well, I do not really know about that.” This is precisely the greatest criticism one generally hears about agnosticism as well – the argument that agnostics are simply indecisive or not strong-willed enough to fully and openly claim their lack of religious beliefs. As for myself, while I do think that the very idea of agnosticism is very much halfway-there of middle-of-the-road, that it is in a way a copout, I am always thinking, “Who am I to judge?” first so it would never cross my mind to accost people for what they believe or not believe or choose not to be unsure about believing.

This is the extent of our journey to the terminological realm, though. We will not concern ourselves with the minutiae of all of these tiny terminological differences we have so far been ploughing through. To reiterate, this is not that sort of work. Whether we talk about atheism, irreligiousness, secularism, apostasy, lack of religious beliefs, non-belief, etc., we shall be alluding to just that: the large (and growing) group of Americans who do not really believe in God. We shall not constantly take into account whether they do not believe in God or whether they are not sure about the whole issue; whether they have no religious beliefs or whether they actively disbelieve; whether they consider themselves irreligious or whether they understand their atheism as a form of religion; whether they would prefer this label or rather that one. This level of counterproductive complexity would make it impossible for us to

³² Luke Muehlhauser, “17 Kinds of Atheism,” *Common Sense Atheism* 16 October 2016, 16 October 2016 <<http://commonsenseatheism.com/?p=6487>>

³³ *The Secular Outlook*, 50-51.

clearly say anything about anything. Suffice to say, then, that while it is apparent that the issue of atheism can be described and discussed in the most nuanced of ways we shall – for the sake of clarity and brevity – make do with one basic word, atheism, and a handful of its synonymous periphrases which will be used interchangeably simply to make the text stylistically more appealing.

1.2 Contents

Stewie: My, my! What a thumping good read! Lions eating Christians, people nailing each other to two-by-fours. I say, you won't find that in Winnie the Pooh.

— Family Guy, S02E02, “Holy Crap”

This brings us to the overview of the contents of this work. In this chapter we have shown that the number of atheists in America is growing, and also went into depth on the definition of the very word “atheist”.

The following chapter, Chapter 2, will revolve around three issues for which there was no space here in the introductory chapter but which need to be elaborated on before we move on to any other topic. Namely, we shall tackle the important demographical minutiae we have so far been overlooking in our discussions of all the (ir)religious surveys conducted in the U.S.; we shall also elaborate on the fact that the author himself is Czech, ergo an atheist, ponder for a moment on the causes of such widespread irreligiousness in the Czech Republic, as well as contemplate the differences between the Czech strand of atheism and the American one; and finally, using the example of Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood*, we shall give clear reasons for why this work is primarily not one of literary analysis.

In Chapter 3 we will discuss the history of atheism in America and look at the most fundamental causes of the relatively sudden rise of it in the past couple of decades. Firstly, we will talk about the force of nature that was Madalyn Murray O'Hair, her organization called American Atheists, and the numerous lawsuits she filed in the name of atheism against both the state and the church. Secondly, we will discuss the often repeated argument about the impossibility of religion and science to occupy the same space as well as describe two of the biggest American court cases against teaching Creationism in public schools. Thirdly, we will

take a closer look at the thought-provoking intersection of theism and feminism and show how, for many people, the only way out of that intersection is via atheism. Next, we will describe the fall of religion from the moral high ground it had been occupying for centuries, focusing mainly on the child abuse charges laid against the church in the recent years and the Boston Globe articles which set this whole scandal into motion. Finally, we will contemplate the role of media and globalization and suggest that there may be a correlation between the growing media visibility as well as audaciousness of modern atheists and the ever growing numbers of atheists in the world.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the movement generally labeled the New Atheism. In the beginning of this chapter we shall establish that there is not much that is particularly new about this movement. Then, we shall move on to the analysis of the basic features of this movement as well as characterization of the four main figures associated with it. Next, we shall address one of the basic arguments of the New Atheist movement by elaborating on the issue of slave Christianity in the colonial times and the early days of the Republic. Since the New Atheism is infamous for being extremely rough and incisive, this chapter will be concluded by tackling the effects that all this biting rhetoric (may have) had on the views of the general public and the evolution of atheism in America.

Chapter 5 will conclude this work by relativizing some of the conclusions drawn in the previous passages as well as look ahead into the future of (ir)religiousness in the U.S. We shall imagine what an atheist America might look like and ponder if such a thing is even possible.

Sister Jude: God had a plan for me all along to be a soldier in his army. But we're losing that war. Did you know the National Broadcasting Company is showing Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer this very week? Nothing about Christ, nothing about the nativity story. This country's turn toward unadulterated blasphemy frightens me. It worries me deeply but that's how the Devil works. Bit by bit he turns our eyes away from God.

— American Horror Story, S02E08, “Unholy Night”

Chapter 2 Specifications, Clarifications, Elaborations



s was mentioned in the previous chapter, before we move on to properly discussing and analyzing the issue of atheism in America, we need to tackle a handful of preliminary issues and make a couple of important detours. This work is long and its contents and tone are very specific, so it is vital to clearly state what led the author to some of the decisions made on the following pages.

2.1 America the Vast and Varied

He that sacrificeth unto any god, save unto the Lord only, he shall be utterly destroyed.

— Exodus 22:20

There is no denying that the United States is an enormous country full of oftentimes antithetical people living antithetical lives in completely antithetical places. Generalizations and gross statistical data do not do the country much justice. While it is true, then, that the turning away from faith takes place, “across the religious landscape, affecting all regions of the country and many demographic groups,”¹ it would be disingenuous, to say the least, if we were to pretend like the US is a homogenous country in whose states, in each and every one of them, people either believe in God or do not believe in His existence in equal measure. It would be an error to think that the shift away from religion is occurring in every corner of the US at the same time and at the exact same pace.

¹ Alan Cooperman, Gregory Smith, and Katherine Ritchey, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” *Pew Research Center* 14 October 2016, 14 October 2016 <<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>>

This is the reason why I felt it was important to explicitly state that Ryan, the man who filled out my questionnaire and whom I mentioned in the introductory chapter, comes from New York. At this point, some may start talking about the differences between blue states and red states, conservatives and liberals; others might be pointing to some arbitrarily created division lines between densely populated states and cities and the sparsely populated countryside, the coastal areas of the United States and the fly-over states. All of these debates, however amusing they might be, seem rather flippant and pale in comparison to discussing hard facts, and those are as following:

On the one hand, in New York in particular, the percentage of religiously unaffiliated people was as high as 27%, according to the Religious Landscape Study conducted by the Pew Research Center.² In states like Vermont or New England this number was even higher – 34% in 2011 according to the American Religious Identification Survey.³

On the other hand, there are states in the US such as Alabama, where the percentage of self-described non-believers was a mere 3% in 2011⁴; or Mississippi with 11% of religiously unaffiliated inhabitants, which was named “The Most Religious U.S. State” by the 2014 Gallup Poll.⁵

From these numbers it is apparent that the U.S. is an incredibly varied country. There are some states, such as New York, in which it is easier to admit one’s absence of faith. There is no problem being perceived as a non-believer since there are already plenty of other ones visibly around. At the same time, though, there are states in which being an atheist is perhaps best kept secret. America is a developed country and here people seem to be sensible most of the time, but many a non-believer in Alabama, for instance, may hesitate to share their lack of faith with many people, if they even find that it might be an option for them.

Another datum about Ryan which I felt necessary to mention was his age. At the time of filling in the questionnaire, Ryan was in his early twenties, which is rather telling. As Cooperman et al. explain:

² “Religious Landscape Study: Adults in New York,” *Pew Research Center* 20 October 2016, 20 October 2016 <<http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/new-york/>>

³ “American Religious Identification Survey,” *Internet Archive* 20 October 2016, 20 October 2016 <https://web.archive.org/web/20110709082644/http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris/key_finding_s.htm>

⁴ “American Religious Identification Survey.”

⁵ Frank Newport, “Mississippi Is Most Religious U.S. State,” *Gallup* 20 October 2016, 20 October 2016 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/153479/Mississippi-Religious-State.aspx?utm_source=alert&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=syndication&utm_content=morelink&utm_term=Politics%20-%20Religion%20-%20Religion%20and%20Social%20Trends%20-%20USA#1>

One of the most important factors in the declining share of Christians and the growth of the ‘nones’ is generational replacement. As the Millennial generation enters adulthood, its members display lower levels of religious affiliation. [...] Fully 36% of Millennials (those between the ages of 18 and 24) are religiously unaffiliated, as are 34% of older Millennials (ages 25-33).⁶

The differences between the levels of religiosity present in various generations are becoming increasingly obvious. The younger a person is the greater the likelihood seems to be that they will not believe in God and/or subscribe to any of the major organized religions (more on that point later). As Cooperman and his team write, “while the drop in Christian affiliation is particularly pronounced among young adults, it is occurring among Americans of all ages.”⁷

Yet another caveat which needs to be mentioned is that while there are many religions in the world, and most of them surely have their adherents represented in the U.S. population, in this diploma work, when tackling the issue of atheism and its origins and repercussions, we shall primarily be discussing, focusing on, and drawing examples from Christianity. This is not meant as a slight towards all the remaining world religions or as a sly suggestion that there are no other kinds of atheists than the Christian ones, but rather as a simple containment measure. Just as America is vast and varied, the topic of atheism is gargantuan, to say the least. It needs to be scaled back, it has to be contained.

We could easily point out, for instance, that according to the 2015 Pew Research Poll the Jewish population in America – the second largest religious group there outside of the various individual Christian faiths – comprised 1.9% of the population⁸; and that according to the study called “A Portrait of Jewish Americans”, which was conducted only two years prior also by Pew Research Center, “Jewish identity is changing in America, where one-in-five Jews (22%) now describe themselves as having no religion.”⁹

Worth noting here is also the fact that this is no recent development either. Already in the sixties and seventies we can trace unapologetic examples of Jewish cultural observers describing their crises of faith. In the 1971 collection of essays edited by Thomas C. Wheeler and entitled “The Immigrant Experience: The Anguish of Becoming American”, Harry

⁶ “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.”

⁷ “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.”

⁸ “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.”

⁹ Luis Lugo, “A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” *Pew Research Center* 21 October 2016, 21 October 2016 <<http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>>

Roskolenko points an accusing finger at what he perceives to be the greatest threat to American religiosity – the country’s affair with unhinged capitalism:

America as an image, has changed the edifice, the manner, if not all the tokens of faith. The American way, for all of us, from Jews to Gentiles, has given us the vulgar interludes of added attractions to a fading faith. The dollar’s green sign hangs seen and unseen from churches and synagogues. Faith is not enough today.¹⁰

Apart from Jewish atheists, we could also focus our attention to the Muslim community in America, the third largest religious community in the U.S. outside of the different strains of Christians. In 2015, Muslims stood at 0.9% and we could note that by the demographic projections conducted by Pew Research Center, “Muslims will make up 2.1% of the U.S. population by the year 2050, surpassing people who identify as Jewish on the basis of religion as the second-largest faith group in the country (not including people who say they have no religion).”¹¹ When it comes to Muslim atheism, though, we already run into a couple of walls. Namely, while some 15% of American Muslims are characterized as so-called non-denominational Muslims, this group is extremely varied and while it may contain some non-believers those two terms are in no way the same.

For example, Robert A. Burns states in his book “Christianity, Islam, and the West” that of those fifteen percent some two fifths characterize themselves non-specifically and rather doubtfully as “just a Muslim”, and then goes on to quote Ibrahim Hooper, the then-chairman of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, who said that, “America gives people the unique opportunity to leave cultural, historical baggage behind,”¹² – making one wonder what exactly is left behind when this so-called “baggage” is removed. It is quite apparent, though, that there is very little analysis published in this area via-a-vis the particular motivations underlying the aforementioned non-specific response; and there does not seem to be much willingness nowadays to invest much time and effort into publishing more of it. The reasons for this apparent lack of effort to look deeper into the issue of Islamic atheism or the existence

¹⁰ Harry Roskolenko, “America, the Thief: A Jewish Search for Freedom,” *The Immigrant Experience: The Anguish of Becoming American*, Jack Agüeros and Thomas C. Wheeler, eds. (New York: Dial Press, 1971): 155-156.

¹¹ Michael Lipka, “Muslims and Islam: Key Findings in the U.S. and Around the World,” *Pew Research Center* 21 October 2016, 21 October 2016 <<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/22/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>>

¹² Robert A. Burns, *Christianity, Islam, and the West* (Plymouth: University Press of America, 2011): 55.

of Muslim apostates might be numerous, but there is one which is regularly mentioned – one to which David Mamet, for instance, alluded in his 2005 play entitled *Romance*:

Defense Attorney: Christ’s brilliance, Christ’s brilliance, Your Honor, like that of Moses, like that of the Prophet...

Judge: The Prophet.

DA: Mohammed.

Judge: Whoa, whoa, whoa, then, let’s be Very Careful what we say about them.

DA: Their Teachings...

Judge: ...hold on: Let’s slow it down: the the the, the people we’re talking about.

Prosecutor: Ancient, ancient religion...

DA: Consist in a message of Peace.

Judge: I don’t think they can object to that, can they?

DA: Your Honor, no.

Judge: Those fine, fine people... [...] And I’m not just saying that because they have all the oil.

Prosecutor, Defendant & Defense Attorney: No.

Prosecutor: No indeed.

Judge: Or because they sometimes, uh, uh, uh, uh, they sometimes...

DA: ... Everybody needs to “blow off steam”...¹³

Questions of Judaism or Islam need not to worry us though, for when discussing the topic of American atheism we shall focus solely on the Christian faith – or lack thereof, to be more precise. With 70.6% of general population, according to Pew Research Center,¹⁴ it is still the dominant religion in the U.S., not to mention that it is the religion on whose foundations the whole country was founded. Not only shall we focus solely on Christianity, though, for we

¹³ David Mamet, *Romance* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005): 87-89.

¹⁴ “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.”

shall also – for the sake of brevity, lucidity, and simplicity – not make any particular distinctions between the various Christian denominations and sects: Between Protestants and Catholics, Mormons and Scientologists, Orthodox Christians, Episcopalians and Evangelicals, black Christians or white Christians, mainstreamers and cult members, regulars and holiday attendees, etc. We shall discuss all of them in general terms, as though they were a single homogenous group. Such handling of the topic may not be ideal but at least it will make the issue at hand manageable.

2.2 The Czech Perspective

***Louie:** I did that to Jesus. It's my fault he got nailed to the cross and blood spurted out of his muscles and his skin was all ribbons. I did that to him, Mom. I steal sometimes and I do stuff I shouldn't do. I drove the nails into Jesus and damaged his nerves and killed him.*

***Mom:** Oh, my God. Wait, is that what they're teaching you in there?*

***Louie:** Yes, it's true.*

***Mom:** No, it's... it's not true. Louie, look at me. It's not true. You had nothing to do with that man being hurt. [...] Come on. The whole thing, it's a bunch of malarkey.*

***Louie:** So you don't believe in any of this?*

***Mom:** No, I don't.*

***Louie:** Well, then, why do you make me come here?*

***Mom:** I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. I get, you know, I thought it was selfish. Just 'cause I don't have religion, not to give it to you. I mean, it's a big deal, religion. You might want it someday. But if I'd known it was gonna stress you out this much, I never would have done it.*

***Louie:** Well, I don't want to go anymore.*

***Mom:** Well, it's fine, you don't have to.*

— Louie, S01E11, “God”

When debating the issue of atheism in America, there is one aspect of the author’s background – my background – which cannot be overlooked for it may have had a subconscious effect on the work. It may have affected the way I chose my resources, the manner with which I handled them, the sorts of issues I opted to focus on in this work. I am Czech. By which I mean, oddly enough, that I am an atheist. Conflating one’s nationality with their religious beliefs (or the non-existence of them) may sound absurd to most people in the

world but in my opinion it makes perfect sense in the case of this country. I shall explain what I mean by that momentarily.

The Czech Republic is generally considered one of the least religious countries in the world, if not the most irreligious one, and it seems that this has not been a recent development. According to the Czech Statistical Office, which conducted a decenary census in 1991, there were 39.9% of people with no faith living in this country and additional 16.2% of Czechs left the question of faith unanswered.¹⁵ Ten years later, irreligious people stood at 59% and those who did not answer the question were at 8.8%. In 2011, 34.5% of Czechs claimed that they were atheist and 44.7% did not even bother filling in an answer to that question. In total, 79.2% of Czech either do not believe in any god or do not believe in Him/Her/It/Them strongly enough to tick that box and admit to their faith. With the exception of Sweden (debatable as survey results vary) and China (most definitely false given the official religious politics of the Chinese regime), such a high percentage of irreligious people in a country is unprecedented.

Additionally, the Czech “version” of atheism, the Czech approach to the very idea, is vastly different from the way atheism is generally thought of in the U.S. In the Czech Republic, children are born and raised in a completely non-religious environment. They oftentimes have to learn about religion at school at which point the very idea of it seems strangely foreign to them if not downright funny. They are not surrounded by living and breathing religion, cannot form religious habits. The community life generally does not revolve around the church, albeit the church may be a part of it. Generally speaking, nobody needs to decide that they do not want to believe in God. At least the last two or three generations of Czechs, overwhelmingly, simply do not believe in Him because nobody told them they should, nobody taught them. I say at least because the history of atheism goes very far into this country’s past; and the history of mistrust of religious institutions and figureheads goes even further.

The first cause of such high levels of irreligiousness in the Czech lands that will inevitably spring to mind is the influence of the past regime. If the very existence of the theological and political theory called Christian Communism is any indicator, the communist ideology as such is not completely antithetical to religion – but Karl Marx was. And his ideas

¹⁵ “Změny struktury obyvatel podle náboženské víry v letech 1991, 2001 a 2011,” *Český statistický úřad* 28 October 2016, 28 October 2016 <<https://www.czso.cz/documents/10180/20551795/17022014a01.pdf/>>

unfortunately influenced the development of many a political leader and many a country, including ours. Which ideas do I have in mind? In this case, the ideas included in the following – elsewhere oftentimes highly abbreviated – quote from Marx’s “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right”:

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.¹⁶

In the actual reality, the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere persecuted the church, systematically trying to suppress and quash it, confiscating its property and creating an air of inhospitality. The police would monitor the activities of priests, nuns, and active church members, sometimes even going as far as to incarcerating them. Communists did indeed do a lot of damage to the church but, to be fair, they only precipitated the inevitable. After all, Slovakia and Poland suffered under the same regime, and yet nowadays they are among the most religious countries in Europe. As I have already mentioned, the roots of Czech atheism reach deeper than to the previous regime.

Miroslav Pauler provides a suitable overview of the Czech people’s relationship to religion in his 2009 bachelor thesis entitled “Christian Churches in the Czech Republic and Slovakia Before and After 1989”. He traces the arrival of Christianity into the Czech lands in the 9th century and points out that in the beginning the function of the church was largely educational – it was to spread literacy.¹⁷ Over the course of centuries, however, Pauler maps out the gradual dissolution of trust that Czech people felt towards the church, as competing Christian ideologies and attempts at religious reforms brought about a significant amount of battles, wars, and suffering.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, “Introduction,” *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, accessed via <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>>

¹⁷ Miroslav Pauler, *Bakalářská práce: Srovnání a stav náboženství v České republice a na Slovensku v současnosti* (Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2009): 8. Accessed via <http://is.muni.cz/th/216879/fss_b_a2/?lang=en>

First, there was Jan Hus, a well-known Czech priest and an early Christian reformer who was betrayed by the Roman-Catholic-leaning king and burned at stake in 1415 for heresy against the doctrines of the Catholic Church. His death had grave repercussions and led to the so-called Hussite Wars, a bloody conflict between the proto-Protestant Hussites and various kings and monarchs who sought to reinforce the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. While the Hussite Wars ended in 1434 with a version of a religious compromise – the Hussites being allowed to practice a slightly defanged variety of their faith – “the crisis of the church could not be undone.”¹⁸

When the Catholic house of Habsburgs seized control over Czech lands, their distaste for all non-Catholic religious ideologies was palpable. Minor conflicts kept escalating and they eventually culminated in the so-called Thirty Years’ War. When the war was over and the dust settled, the various Protestant factions found themselves not only defeated but, more importantly, forcefully recatholicized by the Holy Roman Church. As Bohumil Doležal writes in his book *Události*:

The degree of atheism in the Czech Republic is largely attributed to the forced recatholicization which took place after the Thirty Years’ War. [...] Recatholicization of the Czech lands indeed brought about a period of religious decline. Catholicism became merely a compulsory state ideology. Forced recatholicization of some 80% of local inhabitants practically killed all religious life (which could not be replaced by Baroque folklore). When the end of the 18th century brought at least some relief of the religious tension, it did not cause any sort of religious renaissance, but rather its slow decay.¹⁹

It is precisely this “slow decay” that Doležal writes about, which the United States has not experienced, at least not yet. America does not have those same centuries of (anti-)religious turmoil in her history that the Czech Republic does. In America, Christianity is still reigning supreme, and while there might be some voices being heard now who offer the irreligious alternative it is still just that – an alternative. While in the Czech Republic the number of atheists is – due to the aforementioned historical reasons – so high that atheism is essentially the law of the land, in America it is generally a choice in the sense that most people seem to

¹⁸ Alexandr Ort, *Češi a Evropa* (Praha: AgAkcent, 2008): 6. Translation is mine.

¹⁹ Bohumil Doležal, *Události* (Praha: Revolver Revue, 2014): 123. Translation is mine.

be brought up in a religious family or environment and only when they get older they choose to abandon their faith.

We may, after all, see the clue in the very word “atheism”. Let us reiterate here what Paul Cliteur wrote on this topic, “The ‘a’ [in the word atheism] is an *alpha privans*, it denies what follows.”²⁰ That means that a person can only be an atheist if they were a theist in the first place. This corresponds perfectly to what Ryan, my questionnaire subject, wrote about his (a)religious background:

I wasn’t explicitly raised in a particularly atheist or particularly Christian household. My dad is or was more or less a believer, and my mom was a nonbeliever but didn’t involve herself very heavily on one side or the other. I only became “actively” involved with my atheist beliefs around 19 or 20 when I conceptualized the extent to which people actually believed all of this nonsense.²¹

Ryan was not my only subject. For the sake of variety, then, I am also including the following answer I received from a subject called Nicole. Same as Ryan, Nicole comes from New York and while she is a bit older – she is in her early thirties – she still belongs to the same Millennial generation:

Technically I was raised Roman Catholic. My mother is first generation Italian American, and as such religion played a very big role in her childhood. My father was raised generic Christian, but, to appease my grandfather, became a Catholic before marrying my mother. Then he became a born-again Christian, and that’s where things got strange, and I believe started me on the path of rejecting religion as an adult. [...] I grew up, moved out, went to college, got a job and went into the world, making friends from other faiths, living life, and realizing that there is no such thing as one true faith, one true religion. The more experiences I had, the more I understood about the world around me, the less I believed in a single deity that sits up in the ether pulling strings; the more disgusted I became with how divisive religion can be.²²

My amusement over Nicole’s description of Protestants as “generic Christians” aside, these two subjects perfectly capture and give faces to the statistical data we can derive from the

²⁰ Paul Cliteur, "The Definition of Atheism," *Journal of Religion and Society* 11 (2009): 2.

²¹ Appendix 1.

²² Appendix 2.

2015 Pew Research Center report. In it, Cooperman and his team write that, “For every person who has joined a religion after having been raised unaffiliated, there are more than four people who have become religious ‘nones’ after having been raised in some religion.”²³ To reiterate, then, it is apparent that there is a difference between the Czech and American variety of atheism, the first one’s history and tradition being so long that it has become the norm, while the latter one may still be considered an “otherized” historical novelty. God willing, the impact of this contrast on the work at hand will not be significant or in any way negative.

2.3 Literary Apostate

*I only read one book, but it's a good book, don't you know.
I act the way I act because the Good Book tells me so.
If I wanna know how to be good, it's to the Good Book that I go,
'Cause the Good Book is a book and it is good and it's a book.*

— Tim Minchin, “The Good Book”

Another very important point I also feel a need to make when still in a way properly introducing this work is to announce that this is not primarily a work of literary analysis. Perhaps it has been obvious from the earlier pages but it is not my intention to search for mentions of atheism in American belles-lettres, to trace the approach of American literary giants (as well as some half-forgotten dwarves) to this topic and analyze their use of it as a method of characterization of their characters or as overlying themes in their works.

This decision was not made for lack of resources. Atheism may have been a literary taboo in the past – and it still might be today to some extent – but there are plentiful examples we could draw from. Just to hint at a few of them, in our analysis we could include Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, David Mamet’s *Faustus*, Ernst Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* or plenty of works by the Beat Generation poets. We could actually go as far into history as to the year 1890, when Samuel Porter Putnam, an American atheist and lecturer on freethought, published his poem “Why Don’t He Lend a Hand”, an excerpt of which I am including on the lines below:

²³ “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.”

You say there is a God
Above the boundless sky,
A wise and wondrous deity
Whose strength none can defy.

You say that he is seated
Upon a throne most grand,
Millions of angels at his beck—
Why don't he lend a hand?

See how the earth is moaning,
What countless tears are shed,
See how the plague stalks forward
And brave and sweet lie dead.

[...]

Alas! I fear he's sleeping,
Or is himself a dream,
A bubble on thought's ocean,
Our fancy's fading gleam.

We look in vain to find him
Upon his throne so grand,
Then turn your vision earthward—
'Tis we must lend a hand.

[...]

'Tis we must build the paradise
And bravely right the wrong;
The god above us faileth,
The god within is strong.²⁴

Perhaps we could go even further but there is no point doing that. As was already stated, this is not primarily a work of literary analysis. To be sure, some authors will be mentioned or

²⁴ Samuel P. Putnam, *Why Don't He Lend a Hand and Other Agnostic Poems* (New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1890): 3-4. Accessed via <<https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/34206?show=full>>

their works used. In fact, some of them already have been – disregarding Samuel Porter Putnam we have already had the pleasure of reading some David Mamet and John Winthrop – but it is not my intention to focus on the literary reflections of the topic of atheism in America but rather on atheism itself.

I want to explore how it has been conceived in the modern U.S. social, political and broad cultural sphere; I would like to elaborate on how it functions and what its effects are in the American cultural landscape; and it is my desire to ponder where the American society might go should this trend of people falling away from their religion continue. Introducing literary analysis into this matter and sinking my teeth into belles-lettres would unnecessarily – and rather counterproductively in my opinion – complicate the issue. I shall exemplify what I mean now by doing what I have just claimed I will not do: analyzing the use of atheism in a work by one of the American literary giants – the 1952 novel *Wise Blood* by Flannery O'Connor.

“I don’t believe in anything,”²⁵ confides Hazel Motes, the protagonist of the novel, to a taxi driver who is transporting him to a brothel. He repeats those selfsame words to a car salesman in the next chapter, and then again and again to countless other characters. His self-professed lack of faith is indeed one of his most defining characteristics in the beginning of the novel. Are readers supposed to perceive his frequent and vocal denial of Christianity – or of Jesus, to be more precise – as signs of him being truly an atheist, though? The character’s upbringing would certainly support this theory, echoing the common trope of an adult person fleeing from their faith after having been scorned by it in their childhood – the selfsame trope with which we already came into contact in subchapter 2.2 in Ryan and Nicole’s questionnaire answers. After all, as Caroline Gordon describes it in her 1959 essay dealing with the novel, “Haze was brought up strictly in the Tennessee hills by a mother who, whenever she punished him, which was often, did not fail to remind him that ‘Jesus died to redeem you.’ ‘I never ast him,’ Haze invariably mutters.”²⁶ Is O’Connor’s novel truly a story of an acceptance of atheism, then? Has it ever been reflective of the real-life exodus of believers out of the Christian faith? Or is Hazel’s lack of faith merely a means to a different – very specific and very religious – end for the author?

²⁵ Flannery O’Connor, *Wise Blood* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2007): epub copy with no page numbers. All further quotes from this book are taken from this copy.

²⁶ Caroline Gordon, “Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*,” *Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 2.2 (1959): 6.

Let us begin answering these questions with the help of Thomas H. Brown's words extracted from his essay "O'Connor's Use of Eye Imagery in *Wise Blood*", "Haze had felt the crushing weight of Christ's redemption even as a child, and as an adult he attempts desperately to negate Christ so that he might be freed from the burden which belief in Christ's redemption demanded of him."²⁷ True enough, Hazel makes it painfully obvious that the biggest obstacle in life for him is represented by the figure of Jesus, "Do you think I believe in Jesus?" he says to Mrs. Hitchcock on the train in the beginning of the novel, "Well, I wouldn't even if He existed. Even if He was on this train." Later on, he further explains his standpoint when defining the basic tenets of his Church of Truth without Jesus Christ Crucified: "Nothing matters but that Jesus don't exist." While completely fixated on Jesus, Hazel never mentions that he does not believe in God. The thought never even crosses his mind. In this respect, his irreligious state of mind is not truly suggestive of atheism but rather of a temporary questioning of his relationship with Jesus.

The very fact that Hazel Motes founds his own religion should already point to O'Connor's attempt to reach a much different goal than to elaborate the theme of atheism. Let us once again turn to Paul Cliteur's definition of atheism:

The 'a' [in the word atheism] is an alpha privans, it denies what follows. [...] By denying what follows, you do not become identical with what follows (theism). Someone who is a-religious is simply what it says: not religious. It is not the case that by denying a religion you, by some magic trick, invent a religion of your own: the religion of irreligious or a-religious people.²⁸

Yet, this seems to be precisely what Hazel Motes is trying to do in the novel. Coming back from the army and discovering his childhood home abandoned he finds himself experiencing a crisis of faith. For him, this crisis is not an intimate affair, though. He makes it public, creating – to use Ted R. Spivey's words – "his own personal religion,"²⁹ which denies the one religious figure he despises. Writing the character in this fashion, Flannery O'Connor is surreptitiously setting Hazel up for a failure. In a classical battle of extremes, Hazel seems to flee away from fundamentalism right into the arms of seeming irreligiousness. And the most

²⁷ Thomas H. Brown, "O'Connor's Use of Eye Imagery in *Wise Blood*," *The South Central Bulletin* 37.4 (1977): 139.

²⁸ "The Definition of Atheism," 2.

²⁹ Quoted in Glenn Settle, "Sermon on the Hood of an Essex: Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21.3 (2001): 184.

ironic aspect of this flight is of course the fact that he does so by founding a brand new religion.

The sense of irony regarding Hazel's break from faith is reinforced by O'Connor's crafty manipulation with expressions and imagery related to eyes, sight, and appearance. The whole novel is in fact pervaded with an omnipresent feeling of Hazel being shortsighted in his abandonment of Jesus Christ and of his faith. This lack of foresight, or shortsightedness if you will, is manifested in the novel in a great number of different ways, the most obvious one of them being Hazel's very name.

In the novel it is commonly shortened to "Haze" suggesting obscurity, confusion and vagueness. Alternatively, if we were to focus on the full form of the name, as Glenn Settle does in his essay, we would have to point out that, "Hazel, in Hebrew, means *seen by God*, or, alternatively, *one who sees God*, the source of light (John 1:5)."³⁰ Additionally, once we move to Hazel's surname, O'Connor's probable intentions to depict him as someone who is not seeing something he should, something important, something that is right before his eyes, is made even more apparent. His surname is "Motes" – a word which is immediately reminiscent of the biblical piece of wisdom from Luke 6:41 which says: "And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye?"³¹ Once again, even his surname makes readers wonder that there must be something Hazel is either not aware of or is refusing to see.

This preoccupation with all things ocular is, according to Thomas H. Brown, a characteristic feature of Southern writing. He postulates that one of the most frequent thematic concerns for a lot of Southern writers is with the inadequacies of human perception, "that is, the conflict felt to exist between what appears to be real and that which is intuitively believed to be real."³² In case of *Wise Blood* Brown argues that, "Flannery O'Connor charges her narrative with an intensely consistent imagery designed to complement and reinforce a major theme of the novel – that man tends to see only the surface of things."³³

In essence, the most important thing to realize is that *Wise Blood* is structurally and thematically not a novel about losing faith, or about atheism for that matter. It is in fact a novel about finding faith, about coming back to the "right" path after having strayed away

³⁰ Settle, 199.

³¹ *Holy Bible* (China: Collins, 1991): 940.

³² Brown, 138.

³³ Brown, 138.

from it; and most importantly it is a novel about seeking divine redemption for turning away from religion. Caroline Gordon, for instance, describes Hazel Motes as a “displaced person” and argues that along with a good number of other Flannery O’Connor’s characters he is, “off-center and out of place because they are all victims of the rejection of the Scheme of Redemption.”³⁴

Thus, even if we conceded for the sake of argument that what O’Connor describes in the character of Hazel *is* atheism, we would also have to admit that his atheism is only secondary to what Glenn Settle describes as “his maturation process,” as well as the “Christian *Bildungsroman*” plot of the novel.³⁵ In other words, if O’Connor indeed intended Hazel’s antagonism towards the person of Jesus Christ to be representative of atheism, she only did so to prove how wrong irreligiousness was. In a story of redemption she used her own version of atheism as a literary, structural device; she used it as the sin for which her lead character was supposed to atone.

This is precisely why this thesis will not focus on literary analysis of various authors’ approaches to the theme of atheism in their works. It would introduce too many variables, and make the thesis exceedingly long and unwieldy. Also, since it is my desire to examine real-life effects of atheism on American society and culture, including this sort of literary analysis into it would be counterintuitive for it is apparent that authors use the theme of atheism in their own ways and for their own agendas, and its effect on the readers would be completely speculative on my part. Flannery O’Connor used “atheism” ironically to emphasize the necessity of faith; others might use it for its shock value, or to make a point about their own worldviews. In any way, when it comes to atheism, this work will focus more on American culture than on literature.

³⁴ Gordon, 9.

³⁵ Settle, 198.

*Whilst I was in America, a witness, who happened to be called at the assizes of the county of Chester (State of New York), declared that he did not believe in the existence of God, or in the immortality of the soul. The judge refused to admit his evidence, on the ground that the witness had destroyed beforehand all the confidence of the Court in what he was about to say. *e The newspapers related the fact without any further comment.*

[Footnote e: The New York "Spectator" of August 23, 1831, relates the fact in the following terms:--"The Court of Common Pleas of Chester county (New York) a few days since rejected a witness who declared his disbelief in the existence of God. The presiding judge remarked that he had not before been aware that there was a man living who did not believe in the existence of God; that this belief constituted the sanction of all testimony in a court of justice, and that he knew of no cause in a Christian country where a witness had been permitted to testify without such belief."]

The Americans combine the notions of Christianity and of liberty so intimately in their minds, that it is impossible to make them conceive the one without the other; and with them this conviction does not spring from that barren traditionary faith which seems to vegetate in the soul rather than to live.

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1

Chapter 3 Roots of Modern American Atheism



If we want to discuss the current rise of atheism in America, providing at least some historical context seems more than appropriate. Nevertheless, when tracing the roots of American atheism, how far into history should we go? Where should we start our discussion?

Perhaps we might want to begin in the trenches of the Second World War and attempt to elaborate on the origin and the application of the somewhat-known aphorism claiming that there are no atheists in foxholes.

Perhaps we might want to start with Robert Green Ingersoll known in the last quarter of the nineteenth century as “The Great Agnostic”, of whom Susan Jacoby wrote in her book *The Great Agnostic” Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought* that although he opposed organized religion in general his specific targets were clerics as well as individual believers who only desired to impose their religious convictions on their fellow citizens and to stifle all inquiry that challenged their faith. “If he could not quite convince his audiences that all religion was superstitious myth,” she explained at one

point, “he did convince many to seek out a form of religion that did not require them to renounce the insights of contemporary science or non-mythological history.”¹

Perhaps we might want to go further, let us say, to the times of the First Industrial Revolution. Here we might want to focus on the labor reformer by the name of Frances Wright who, “arrived in New York City in 1829, offering lectures preaching free love, atheism, and abolitionism with a presentation that rivaled vaudeville burlesque shows for entertainment value.”²

Perhaps we might want to follow the lead of so many other writers and set off on our historical journey accompanied by the Founding Fathers themselves, particularly by Thomas Jefferson. After all, there has been much speculation both in the press and in other media outlets about their religious beliefs or lack thereof. All of this speculation is – and always has been – of course completely unfounded. It may have sold well, which may have been the point from the very beginning, but that is all. The entire debate about Jefferson, for instance, usually revolves around the fact that, “First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion,”³ as well as his own following quote:

Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason than of blindfolded fear. [...] Do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences. If it ends in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise and in the love of others which it will procure for you.⁴

Whatever arguments one may conjure up using these two pieces of information, though, inevitably fall short when one discovers that Jefferson, as the authors of *Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia* put it, “was raised as an Anglican, but was influenced by English deists such as

¹ Susan Jacoby, *The Great Agnostic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013): epub copy with no page numbers.

² Kevin Hillstrom and Laurie Collier Hillstrom, eds., *Industrial Revolution in America: Communications* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2007): 148.

³ J. Judd Owen, “The Struggle Between ‘Religion and Nonreligion’: Jefferson, Backus, and the Dissonance of America’s Founding Principles,” *The American Political Science Review* 101.3 (2007): 493.

⁴ Thomas Jefferson, *Jefferson's Works, Vol. ii.*, quoted in *Project Gutenberg Self-Publishing Press*, accessed via <http://self.gutenberg.org/articles/eng/Religious_views_of_Thomas_Jefferson#cite_note-35>

Bolingbroke and Shaftesbury,”⁵ and that the quote regarding the questioning of the existence of a God was most definitely influenced by European Enlightenment. In fact, it has been widely confirmed and written about that Jefferson, just like so many of his contemporaries whose faith has been questioned over the past decades, was indeed a man of faith. The point is that it was not the faith of orthodox Christianity, which they all mistrusted and some of them even despised, but rather rational Christianity, deism, Unitarianism, or as J. Judd Owen calls it, “religion of reason”.⁶ Kenneth D. Wald and Allison Calhoun-Brown elaborate on this topic in their book *Religion and Politics in the United States* when they write, “For some of the Founders, notably Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, organized religion [...] was thought to pervert the true meaning of religion. Both, like most of their contemporaries, were adherents of what was called ‘enlightened religion’, an approach that emphasized reason rather than dogma in determining religious values.”⁷

Already having mentioned the intellectual movement of European Enlightenment, perhaps we might want to follow this historical thread, explore the birthplace of western atheism, and uncover all the different connections between its European origins and its contemporary American forms. We might want to start with someone like Jeremy Bentham, for example, who was an English philosopher and social reformer who in the early nineteenth century carried out an exhaustive examination of religion, by criticizing organized religion, ridiculing historical Christianity, and attempting to disprove the logic of Christian theology. As James E. Crimmins puts it in his essay entitled “Bentham on Religion: Atheism and the Secular Society”, “The critique of organized religion was always the strong point of Bentham’s offensive against religion, [attacking] the redundancies and perniciousness of subscription to articles of faith and the imposition of compulsory oaths in ‘Swear Not At All’, penal laws against religious dissent, or Common Law crime of blasphemy.”⁸

Perhaps we might want to extend the scope of this search to include continental Europe as well, as Michael Buckley did in his book *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*. James E. Force sums up Buckley’s arguments in his review of the book when he writes that the author believes atheism emerged in the modern times only because Christian theology in the age of

⁵ “Jefferson’s Religious Beliefs,” *Jefferson Monticello* 8 December 2016, 8 December 2016
 <<https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/jeffersons-religious-beliefs>>

⁶ Owen, 494.

⁷ Kenneth D. Wald and Allison Calhoun-Brown, *Religion and Politics in the United States* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011): 70.

⁸ James E. Crimmins, “Bentham on Religion: Atheism and the Secular Society,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47.1 (1986): 96.

rationalism became subservient to philosophical reason. “The abandonment of the simple reality of Jesus Christ by the new rationalistic defenders of the faith (Lessius, Marsenne, Descartes, Malebranche, Newton, Clarke),” interprets Force, “directly causes the necessary logical conditions for the emergence of genuine atheism in the radical materialism of Diderot and Holbach.”⁹

Or perhaps we might want to take this exploration even deeper into European history, following the lead of John Edwards who argues in one of his essays that while atheism, “in any modern sense, was not an option in the sixteenth century or earlier, it does appear none the less that there was indeed genuine religious skepticism in late medieval and early modern Europe.”¹⁰ Here, we might use as a springboard the famous quote by Sir Francis Bacon who once said:

Atheism leaves to man reason, philosophy, natural piety, laws, reputation, and everything that can serve to conduct him to virtue; but superstition destroys all these, and erects itself into a tyranny over the understandings of men: hence atheism never disturbs the government, but renders man more clear-sighted, since he sees nothing beyond the boundaries of the present life.¹¹

However, I feel like that would be taking things too far. Yes, Atheism in America has a long history. Yes, it was influenced by European rationalism and Enlightenment. Nonetheless, if we were to go down this path of historical exploration this would have to be a completely different work. To reiterate, I am interested in atheism in America today, and as such I will not further elaborate the – let us call it – proto-history of atheism. If we were to do that, we would get bogged down in biblical analyses, philosophical arguments and theological treatises, and that is not what this thesis is about.

When tracing the roots of modern American atheism, then, we will go (for the most part) no further than to the second half of the twentieth century. After all, while the important figures such as Thomas Jefferson, Jeremy Bentham or René Descartes will certainly be casting their shadow on the following pages, we will discuss matters with a much more immediate effect on people today – as it is precisely people today who stand in the center of this work.

⁹ James E. Force, “The Origins of Modern Atheism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50.1 (1989): 154.

¹⁰ John Edwards, “Religious Faith, Doubt and Atheism: Reply,” *Past & Present* 128 (1990): 155.

¹¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012): 384.

3.1 The Forgotten Battles of Madalyn Murray O'Hair

Is the promotion of atheism a criminal offense at common law? There are four possible grounds for holding that it is, or that under some circumstances it may be.

1. That a denial of the very existence of God is an offense against God, and that in order to vindicate the majesty of God the state should punish it. This view has been distinctly rejected by the courts, both in England and in the United States. In so far as the offense is an offense against God, it is left for God or the Church to deal with it.

2. That the civil order is based on religion and in particular on Christianity, and that to attack religion or the fundamental doctrines of Christianity is to loosen the bonds of society and to endanger the state. [...] It is no longer felt that it can be said that the decay of the Christian religion would mean the dissolution of the state, nor that a decorous discussion of the merits of Christianity would mean its decay.

3. That since the majority of the members of the community are Christians, an attack upon Christianity has a tendency to cause a breach of the peace. Certainly the tendency to cause a breach of the peace may make conduct criminal which would otherwise be innocent. But today it can hardly be said that a decorous argument against Christianity tends to cause a breach of the peace.

4. That an attack upon religion constitutes a public nuisance. It is a criminal offense to disturb the community by thrusting upon it something disgusting and nasty, whether that thing be a smell, a sight or an idea. Hence, indecorous or contumelious language in regard to things generally regarded by the community as sacred constitutes a public nuisance. But a decorous discussion of such things is no nuisance.

— “The Legality of Atheism”, Harvard Law Review, 1917

The first person we need to mention when discussing the topic of modern-day American atheism is without a doubt Madalyn Murray O'Hair. Today, O'Hair remains a nearly forgotten figure of American history but her cultural significance, particularly when it comes to the issue of atheism, was immense. She was the most prominent figure of the atheist movement in the twentieth-century America, a virulent activist for worldwide secularism, the founder of the still-operating American Atheists organization, and according to the 1964 cover of the *Life* magazine also “The Most Hated Woman in America”. She was hated, she was hateful, and she has paid the highest price for that. What she has done for the visibility and proliferation of atheism in the U.S., though, has been utterly unprecedented.

To be fair, there had been some attempts to curtail the power of the church before O'Hair came onto the scene; particularly when it comes to the educational system – which is the one area of O'Hair's major success which she used as a platform to build her profile – but there had been rumblings in the system already in 1948. At that time, a lawyer by the name of Vashti McCollum filed a suit to end religious instruction in schools in Champaign, Illinois. The problem was that the McCollums were not churchgoers and yet Vashti's son Jim, “was

being pressured to take an hour of regular religious instruction in his public grammar school.”¹² The case reached Supreme Court which ruled in favor of McCollum, arguing that the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution – in particular Article I which says, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”¹³ – creates a wall of separation between religious groups and the curricula in public schools.

As Ann Rowe Seaman points out, lawsuits and skirmishes like this “were representative of many around the country that set the stage for Madalyn’s blastoff to fame in the early 1960s.”¹⁴ The debates were lively, to say the least, and quite divisive. For every person who believed that everyone should leave religion to the churches, and not drag it to schools and various public spaces, there were others pointing out that whatever the Founding Fathers may have intended when writing about the separation of church and state, America has never been a genuinely secular nation. As Seaman explains this point, “Christianity was part of western culture [so] it should be enough to show tolerance for minority views. But to excise all traces of religion would produce ‘atheistic humanism’ which, they said, amounted simply to another religion.”¹⁵ Even in that point in history, as Carl Russell Fish writes in his essay “American Democracy”, some members of American society have come to realize that “the tyranny of the majority may be as painful in quality, though not in quantity, as the tyranny of a single person or a class.”¹⁶ And this was precisely the point when Madalyn Murray O’Hair came onto the stage of American culture and politics.

O’Hair was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on April 13, 1919, and her upbringing was no different from that of so many others, recalling memories of what was said in Chapter 2 when we were comparing the American and Czech strands of atheism. O’Hair was brought up in a Presbyterian family but she soon began to question the quintessential truth and morality of her faith-based beliefs. Ted Dracos describes in his 2003 book *Ungodly: The Passions, Torments, and Murder of Atheist Madalyn Murray O’Hair* a rather apocryphal-sounding story of an “anti-epiphany” she experienced one day in 1945 during a severe thunderstorm. Pregnant with her first child, she is said to have gone outside to challenge God to strike her with a lightning bolt, taking pleasure in the fact that even though she bated Him

¹² Ann Rowe Seaman, *America’s Most Hated Woman* (New York: The Continuum Publishing, 2006): 30.

¹³ *The Constitution of the United States of America* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 2007): 13.

¹⁴ Seaman, 30.

¹⁵ Seaman, 44.

¹⁶ Carl Russell Fish, “American Democracy,” *Minnesota History Bulletin* 3.5 (1920): 261.

and cursed at Him, nothing happened to her.¹⁷ As James Rogers adds in his article on O’Hair, “This event set a precedent for numerous dramatic and attention-seeking decisions she would make later in her life, nearly all of which were facilitated by her abhorrence of religion.”¹⁸

Citing O’Hair’s abhorrence of religion is a good point because when one begins researching her one inevitably stumbles upon several tall-tales about the first impetus she got to push back against religion. According to one, her main motivation was her son who was forced to read the Bible every day in his school – something he and/or his mother felt uncomfortable with and was/were unwilling to participate in.¹⁹ According to another, she abandoned her faith in the army after being spurned by her Catholic would-be husband and the father of her first son.²⁰ And yet another rather apocryphal-sounding story features O’Hair as a young teenager, the Bible, and some rather fortuitous climatic phenomena. Ann Rowe Seaman describes this tale in her oddly-familiar-sounding book *America’s Most Hated Woman: The Life and Gruesome Death of Madalyn Murray O’Hair* in the following fashion:

One bored weekend, Madalyn claimed years later, she read the Bible through. When she realized what was actually in there—the cruelty and immorality—she peeked at her parents in the kitchen, and reflected with dismay that they actually believed this stuff. Visiting her grandparents a short time later, she was sent to get the mail, a mile or so walk. It was snowing, and when it stopped, the sun came out and she was snow-blinded. She thought she had been struck blind because of her bad thoughts about God. Her reaction was not fear, but anger at a God who would so harshly punish a little girl. That was her official story of the seeds of her atheism.²¹

One thing is clear, which is that O’Hair truly hated religion. She despised it with all her might. She was of the opinion that religion oppressed people and should therefore be stamped out of the hearts and minds of people, eradicated from the whole culture. “‘This invidious thought system,’ she wrote, ‘penetrates everywhere, controls, sucks money, time and effort, energy, promising everything and giving nothing. By now we could have conquered all

¹⁷ Ted Dracos, *Ungodly: The Passions, Torments, and Murder of Atheist Madalyn Murray O’Hair* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 14-15.

¹⁸ James Rogers, “The Most Hated Woman in America,” *U.S. History Scene* 5 November 2016, 5 November 2016 <<http://ushistoryscene.com/article/madalyn-murray-ohair/>>

¹⁹ Seaman, 30-31.

²⁰ Seaman, 29.

²¹ Seaman, 21.

disease with the money that goes to this sick philosophy. Slums could be cleared, unemployment solved, wars stopped...”²²

It is up for debate, though, to what extent she truly believed her own rage, and how much she was merely playing up her emotions and inflammatory rhetoric for her audiences. The truth of the matter is that O’Hair loved the attention that her unabashed public atheism brought her. As Ann Rowe Seaman points out, “This was a Catholic country [...] and she enjoyed bringing gasps of shock even from the student audience. She called Jesus ‘the most despicable man in human history, including Hitler,’ and the Bible ‘an ugly, brutal, vicious book.’ She loved disturbing Catholics.”²³ Disturbed they were indeed, both by her outrageous words and her actions.

As was to some extent expected, O’Hair very quickly found out how people felt about offensive firebrands and troublemakers; how they truly felt about outspoken atheists attempting to disrupt the religious status quo in the country and step all over their beliefs. She soon found out what people would do to punish those who chose to disrupt the status quo. O’Hair’s son was reportedly bullied at school, the woman herself has become the target of many an insult, and somebody even threw a cinder block through her office window as she worked late one night. She received hate mail and a good deal of death threats. As Seaman describes it, “The Murray-Mays family was about to find out what Americans who didn’t believe in God often suffered in their communities, and in what fear and persecution many of them lived.”²⁴

Still, Madalyn Murray O’Hair was not deterred and in spite of all of these troubles and annoyances, she became very successful at what she was doing. Atheism was still far from an acceptable life choice – once again, let us not forget that we are talking about America where it most often is a conscious choice, not to mention America in the 60s and 70s – but there were enough (secret) atheists in the U.S. to cater to. Luckily for O’Hair, thanks to her outgoing personality, her outrageousness and therefore her heightened visibility, more and more atheists were coming out of the woodwork as well.

When she founded American Atheists in 1963, the non-profit activist organization whose aim was to spread the Good Word of non-belief, she initially thought she could earn

²² Quoted in Seaman, 175.

²³ Seaman, 141.

²⁴ Seaman, 50.

her living by selling atheism-themed books, launching a magazine as well as running her own radio, but as Seaman points out, “she saw what really fired donors up were two things: lawsuits—they would give if they thought some corrective was in the pipeline—and persecution.”²⁵ Apart from speaking at various meetings, schools, homes, and giving interviews to newspapers and TV reporters, O’Hair became a serial plaintiff.

Her first – and perhaps culturally most significant success – took place the same year she founded American Atheists. It was her winning the *Murray v. Curlett* suit in June 1963. The win came only a year after the so-called Regents Prayer case, or the United States Supreme Court case of *Engel v. Vitale*, which ruled that it was unconstitutional for state officials to compose an official school prayer and then force pupils to recite it in public schools.²⁶ In O’Hair’s own case, the Supreme Court ruled 8:1 to ban the Lord’s Prayer and Bible reading in public schools in Abington School District.²⁷ At the time, the case received a lot of media attention and turned O’Hair into a nation-wide sensation. Particularly her oft-quoted opening statement was widely disseminated in the media (more on this point in the subchapter 3.5). Its somewhat abbreviated version reads as follows:

Your petitioners are atheists and they define their beliefs as follows. An atheist loves his fellow man instead of god. An atheist believes that heaven is something for which we should work now – here on earth for all men together to enjoy. An atheist believes that he can get no help through prayer but that he must find in himself the inner conviction and strength to meet life, to grapple with it, to subdue it, and enjoy it. An atheist believes that only in a knowledge of himself and a knowledge of his fellow man can he find the understanding that will help to a life of fulfillment. He seeks to know himself and his fellow man rather than to know a god. An atheist believes that a hospital should be built instead of a church. An atheist believes that a deed must be done instead of a prayer said. An atheist strives for involvement in life and not escape into death. He wants disease conquered, poverty vanquished, war eliminated. He wants man to understand and love man. He wants an ethical way of life. He believes that we cannot rely on a god or channel action into prayer nor hope for an end of troubles in a hereafter. He

²⁵ Seaman, 51.

²⁶ “*Engel v. Vitale*,” *Justia* 6 November 2016, 6 November 2016
<<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/370/421/case.html>>

²⁷ “*Abington School District v. Schempp*,” *Legal Dictionary* 6 November 2016, 6 November 2016 <<http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Murray+v.+Curlett>>

believes that we are our brother's keepers and are keepers of our own lives; that we are responsible persons and the job is here and the time is now.²⁸

It was in this moment that Madalyn Murray O'Hair became the face of atheism in America. And as was already indicated, this win was – along with the foundation of the American Atheists organization – only a beginning for her. She went on to file lawsuit after lawsuit against either the church or the state apparatus. Most of them were dismissed or simply did not result in her favor, but that did not matter so much to her. She loved stirring controversies, causing trouble, and was reveling in people's discomfort over the very idea of atheism receiving so much exposure.

To have some idea about the scope of her strives and legal endeavors, I have compiled a short list of cases in which O'Hair was involved. It is in no way complete but it should be representative of her aims – which were to lash out against religious institutions or religion itself in any way possible, however small and insignificant.

– She would often sue the church and attack its property exemption. For example, in October of 1963 she sued the city of Baltimore because of its church tax exemption. This actually happened to be one of the biggest thorns in O'Hair's eye. When Phil Donahue reminisced in an interview with Amy Goodman about the time he invited O'Hair to his show he said, “She brought issues. ‘I don't care if you worship a pet rock, you pay for it. I'm tired of paying more taxes because of your churches getting phony tax relief that causes my taxes to—’ Oh, I mean, she was fabulous.”²⁹

– In 1964 she sued the United States in order to force the FCC (Federal Communication Commission) to make it so that atheists would have equal time with religion on both radio and television.³⁰

– She filed *O'Hair v. Cook*, a suit in which she was asking for a ban on all prayer in public meetings.³¹

²⁸ “About American Atheists,” *American Atheists* 6 November 2016, 6 November 2016

<<http://www.atheists.org/about-us>>

²⁹ “Phil Donahue: ‘We Have an Emergency in the Media and We Have to Fix It’,” *Democracy Now* 6 November 2016, 6 November 2016 <http://www.democracynow.org/2005/3/24/phil_donahue_we_have_an_emergency>

³⁰ “Lawsuits,” *American Atheists* 6 November 2016, 6 November 2016
<<https://web.archive.org/web/20071002054105/http://www.atheists.org/legal/>>

³¹ Seaman, 173.

– In *O’Hair v. Clemens*, she filed a \$9 million suit against the DC governor and attorney general for agreeing to display a crèche in the Capitol rotunda during the time of Christmas.³²

–With *American Atheists*, in *Murray v. Curlett*, she challenged Bible reading and prayer recitation in Maryland public schools.³³

– In December of 1968 when three Apollo 8 astronauts orbited the moon at which occasion one of them, Commander Borman, read a widely reported passage from the Bible, O’Hair was absolutely livid. She publically called it “tragic” that this triumph of science had to be dragged to its knees by organized religion, not to mention unconstitutional. She therefore filed suit to enjoin NASA from directing or permitting religious activities or ceremonies in the space program. Not only did she find it unconstitutional but the Christian prayer also discriminated against other religions and non-believers.³⁴

– She also attacked the Pledge of Allegiance, writing to the Baltimore Board of Education that she wanted the words ‘under God’ to be removed from it. As she claimed the words were “offensive to our individual liberties and our freedom of conscience. We are atheists.”³⁵

– In 1978 she filed two lawsuits at once. In the first, she challenged the phrase “In God We Trust” on the U.S. currency, and in the other she wanted to have removed from the Texas constitution a provision which required a belief in God of all people holding a public office.³⁶

– “In mid-September 1979, Madalyn filed a high-profile suit to prevent the new pope, John Paul II, from holding an October mass on the Washington Mall. She asked for \$10,001 in damages for deprivation of atheists’ rights. This was an unconstitutional entanglement of religion with government.”³⁷

– Apart from all of this she also vowed to do all that was in her power to disrupt the traditional hour of Christmas carols sung by state employees in the Capitol on

³² Seaman, 173.

³³ “Lawsuits,” *American Atheists*.”

³⁴ Seaman, 115-117.

³⁵ Quoted in Seaman, 60.

³⁶ “Lawsuits,” *American Atheists*.”

³⁷ Seaman, 190.

December 20th. She pledged to go after a seven-foot tablet of the Ten Commandments at the Capitol, and to put an end to using a small room in that building as an impromptu chapel. Even prayers at sporting events were thorns in her eyes, along with a group of teachers from McCallum High who regularly prayed in the school library, or an unlicensed sale of alcoholic beverages at church socials, etc.³⁸

From the lines above it is clear that O’Hair made it her life’s mission to inflict as much damage to the church and to religion in general as possible, and to a great extent she succeeded. Her organization is still running today under the leadership of David Silverman, filing lawsuits left and right, promoting atheism by/and attacking religion at every chance. Additionally, O’Hair’s war on religion inspired many others to join her fight. In 1978, Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF) was founded by Ann Nicole Gaylor and her daughter Annie Laurie Gaylor, which today has approximately 23,500 members.³⁹ FFRF is a non-profit organization advocating for non-theists by legally attacking any and all attempts to use federal or public money to fund religiously-based projects, programs, and displays.

Even more important, though, was O’Hair’s indirect effect. Seaman only mentions the most superficial level of anxiety that O’Hair’s attacks against spending public dollars on religious causes gave people when she writes, “In neighborhoods and small sanctuaries and small prayer groups across the nation, ordinary people were asking, would this eventually mean you couldn’t pray on sidewalks because they were paid for by tax dollars? Or have an Easter parade — wouldn’t the street be public property?”⁴⁰ I would argue that her barrage of lawsuits against the state and the church, her open and sometimes even successful attacks against religion, and to some extent her extremely pointed and inflammatory rhetoric (although we shall discuss this very point in more depth in the following chapter which has to do with the New Atheists) may have sowed seeds of religious doubt in a lot of Americans. As Seaman describes it in her book, “There was an insidious kind of decay, said even liberal churchmen, when you have to surgically remove every shred of religion from public life.”⁴¹ Thanks to O’Hair and people like her, gone was the untouchability of the church, integrity of this religious institution, and perhaps even the infallibility of religion as such. People may

³⁸ Seaman, 173.

³⁹ “Home Page,” *Freedom from Religion Foundation* 6 November 2016, 6 November 2016 <<https://ffrf.org/>>

⁴⁰ Seaman, 191.

⁴¹ Seaman, 248.

have hated O'Hair for being "unpleasant"⁴² – and in the end it may have brought about her downfall – but she made them think about their beliefs. And one has to wonder where all of this pondering may have led some of them.

3.2 Scientific Contrariety

Friend: You spoke of a greater power—

Faustus: Yes. Not religion, which to the scientific mind cannot be quantified.

Friend: Is it, then, worthless?

Faustus: To the scientist.

— David Mamet, *Faustus*

Apart from the battles O'Hair fought herself, there were many others connected not so much to prayers in schools in general but to Bible classes in particular. The crux of the problem – and another important cause of the ebbing of people of faith in America – has been the relatively recent juxtaposition of faith with science, and the ensuing assumption that since faith is unscientific it is also incredulous, irrelevant, reactionary, and most importantly indicative of one's lacking intellect. Why should anyone believe in God if it means that they will be accused by writers and media personalities the likes of Christopher Hitchens or Bill Maher of being a simpleton who is incapable of distinguishing between the real world of scientific facts and the made-up sphere of fairy-tales and literary superstitions, right? Right?

It is worth noting, though, that it has not always been like this. Science has not always been juxtaposed to religion, and religious people have not always been mocked by pundits for their unscientific beliefs. By saying that I obviously do not mean to allude to the Founding Fathers and their preference for reason. The very names of their preferred faiths, "rational Christianity" and "religion of reason", are clearly telling us that they clearly did not see these two ideas as polar opposites; that they did not understand these two terms to be mutually exclusive.

⁴² "Phil Donahue: 'We Have an Emergency in the Media and We Have to Fix It'," *Democracy Now* 6 November 2016, 6 November 2016 <http://www.democracynow.org/2005/3/24/phil_donahue_we_have_an_emergency>

In fact, European history is full of scientists who were also men of faith – people on whose shoulders stands the whole contemporary scientific community. Let us mention but a few of them: the father of the scientific method Francis Bacon, the discoverer of gravity Isaac Newton, the quantum theory physicist Max Planck, or most recently the molecular biophysicist Alister McGrath. In 1881 American writer and Williams College professor John Bascom felt sufficiently confident to write in his essay “Atheism in Colleges” that, “Unbelief has as yet met with more obstruction in America than in England, and cannot be said to have taken any large possession of the ruling thought among us.”⁴³ Yet, not even a century later the situation has become radically different. What has happened?

Thomas F. Gieryn, George M. Bevens, and Stephen C. Zehr argue in their essay “Professionalization of American Scientists: Public Science in the Creation / Evolution Trials” that the boundary between religion and science has throughout the twentieth century been a site for both cultural and professional conflict. They base their analysis of court testimonies and other documents pertaining to two major trials between science and religion – the Scopes “Monkey Trial” of 1925 and the McLean “Creation-Science” trial of 1981-82.

The first trial, formally known as *The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes*, revolved around a teacher from Dayton who was indicted for teaching the Darwinian theory of evolution to a public school biology class which, at that time and in that state, was in direct violation of a recently passed statute making it illegal to teach any ideas which would contradict the Scripture.⁴⁴ The trial drew intense national publicity, particularly because of the caliber of the lawyers involved in the hearings, and at the end of it John T. Scopes was found guilty and fined \$100. The verdict was nevertheless overturned on a technicality and unfortunately the whole issue was in a moment’s time blissfully forgotten.

People remembered the trial again, though, when in 1981 – after many other cases like this were brought to various courts in various states, and never reached an entirely satisfactory conclusion –⁴⁵ a lawsuit was filed in the Arkansas District Court by a group of parents, clergymen, and religious organizations arguing that the Arkansas state law requiring balanced treatment of the two major theories of origins – “creation-science” and “evolution-science” – was unconstitutional because it violated the First Amendment of the US Constitution. This

⁴³ John Bascom, “Atheism in Colleges,” *The North American Review* 132.290 (1881): 32.

⁴⁴ Thomas F. Gieryn, George M. Bevens, and Stephen C. Zehr. “Professionalization of American Scientists: Public Science in the Creation/Evolution Trials,” *American Sociological Review* 50.3 (1985): 392.

⁴⁵ For instance *Epperson v. Arkansas* from 1968.

time around, the presiding judge William Overton sided not with religion but with science, and he ruled that creation-science is no science at all and as such it has no place in the public school curriculum in that district of Arkansas. Barbara Forrest explains the ramifications of this ruling in her thesis “Understanding the Intelligent Design” writing that, “Although McLean was a district court ruling (U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Arkansas) and was therefore not binding on schools outside that district, it has had a powerful influence on subsequent rulings concerning creationism because of its clear, specific definition of science, which Judge Overton used to rule that ‘creation science’ is religion, not science.”⁴⁶

Nowadays, the McLean trial – just like the Monkey Trial beforehand – is considered to be simply one of the many efforts by the Christian church, “to make curricula of public schools consistent with their religious values.”⁴⁷ Most importantly, though, we could argue that it – just like all those other cases of this sort – tipped the scale when it came to Americans drawing a line between religion and science. As Gieryn, Bevins, and Zehr write, “the rhetoric of scientists testifying at the trials presented images and ideologies of science that demarcated it from religious belief in ways that identified its uniqueness and utility.”⁴⁸ And it demarcated it publically, for everyone to see. Something changed in America the day the ruling was carried out. A line was drawn, a boundary set up, and the noose began to tighten around religion’s neck.

There are many ways to describe the situation nowadays; this juxtaposition of scientific objectivity and religious faith, of knowledge and belief, of accuracy and hope, of minds and hearts, bodies and souls. Paul Cliteur chose to word it in the following way, “Atheism is considered to be an intellectual and explicit choice.”⁴⁹ This statement brings us back not only to the opening paragraph of this chapter in which I mentioned that being a believer is supposed to be indicative of one’s lacking intellect, but also to Chapter 2 in which we were contrasting Czech “mainstream” atheism to its American “dissenting” variety. Furthermore, Professor Tor Egil Forland believes that the ideologies or worldviews of modern science and

⁴⁶ Barbara Forrest, “Understanding the Intelligent Design, Creationists Movement: Its True Nature and Goals,” *Center for Inquiry* (2007): 6.

⁴⁷ Gieryn, 392.

⁴⁸ Gieryn, 392.

⁴⁹ Paul Cliteur, “The Definition of Atheism,” *Journal of Religion and Society* 11 (2009): 10.

contemporary religions are radically incompatible, citing that “scientific explanations of how the world works have no room for God or other supernatural entities.”⁵⁰

Next to these two writers we could also mention John Edwards, who points out that there is an undeniable assumption that, “the language of the rational, non-believing observer is somehow objective, whereas that of the believing participants is not,”⁵¹ or Brad S. Gregory, who invokes some historical connections and postulates that the question of the relationship between science and religion has been shaped over the centuries – first by the Enlightenment critique of religion, then by the advent and repercussions of Darwinism, or by the ever increasing secularization of universities as well as societies at large. “What more is there to be said?” asks Gregory at one point. “When will these uncomprehending religious believers finally admit that the scientific worldview is simply, in the words of the philosopher John Searle, ‘the worldview that we have,’ and acknowledge that their premodern beliefs are incompatible with the demands of modern knowledge?”⁵²

The question left to be asked at this point is: “Why?” Why does it matter what people believe, even if they work as scientists? Why are religion and science considered antithetical to the point that so many writers would feel justified in calling religious people stupid? Why does any of this matter? When it comes to teaching religious doctrines at schools, I am of course all for the separation of church and state. Nevertheless, when one starts reading texts which have to do with the opposition of science and religion, one inevitably gets to the point when their authors do not simply attack the force-feeding of religion to children and teaching them very specific, religious, non-scientific dogmas, but instead attack the unscientific nature of belief, and even believers themselves. This is what is so mind-boggling – the reason behind these kinds of attacks. After all, what is the point of them? To show that belief is not evidence-based? Why, yes, that is why they call it belief. The point is, if this belief is not misused, why does it matter that it exists and why should it be attacked for not being scientific?

In other words, it is wonderful that the team of Dr. Dimitrios Kapogiannis used MRI machines to study “brain on religion” in order to, “define the psychological structure of religious belief, based on fundamental cognitive processes, and to reveal the corresponding

⁵⁰ Quoted in Brad S. Gregory, “No Room for God? History, Science, Metaphysics, and the Study of Religion,” *History and Theory* 47.4 (2008): 496.

⁵¹ Edwards, 161.

⁵² Gregory, 496.

pattern of brain activation to determine the relevance of evolutionary theories of cognitive development to the development of religious beliefs.”⁵³ I am more than happy to find that, “Contemporary psychological theories consider religious belief and behavior as complex brain-based phenomena that may have co-emerged in our species with novel cognitive processes for social cognition.”⁵⁴ A lot of people, including myself, will find it fascinating to learn about hyperactive agency detection, an evolutionarily developed agency detection mechanism which makes us mistake a shadow for a burglar but never the other way around, and which may help explain some of the “unexplainable” phenomena about religion such as miracles.⁵⁵ And it was a welcome revelation to learn about the existence of the psychological phenomenon called pareidolia, which makes the human mind perceive familiar patterns where none actually appear because it suddenly explained why so many people all around the world kept seeing the faces of Jesus in various food items.⁵⁶

All of these instances of scientific discovery in and of themselves are brilliant, but when someone – any of the New Atheists, for instance, whom we shall discuss in the next chapter – attempts to use them as a leverage to force people of faith to “come to their senses”, it makes me wonder what is the point of such an endeavor. Once again, religion and science were not mutually exclusive phenomena for most of human history, and I do not see any reason why, on an individual and strictly non-institutional level, they should be treated as such, particularly given the fact that these kinds of discussions typically involve large doses of rudeness and name-calling. There is enough of that in the world already; no need to add to that pile.

However I may feel, though, the fact remains that in the world of today science and religion have been positioned as antithetical forces. One is considered modern and smart and as such desirable, while the other is oftentimes mocked for being outdated, dim, and undesirable in the public arena. It is no wonder that when these two phenomena are being compared or even just discussed in the same breath, an increasing number of people flock away from religion, not wanting to be associated with something that has so many negative connotations.

⁵³ Dimitrios Kapogiannis et al., “Cognitive and Neural Foundations of Religious Belief,” *PNAS* 106.12 (2009): 4876.

⁵⁴ Kapogiannis, 4876.

⁵⁵ Bart B. van Bockstaele, “Professor Reveals Why We Believe in Gods,” *Digital Journal* 9 November 2016, 9 November 2016 <<http://digitaljournal.com/article/271772>>

⁵⁶ Daniel Florien, “Why People See Mary’s Face on Cheese Sandwiches,” *Science & Religion Today* 9 November 2016, 9 November 2016 <<http://www.scienceandreligiontoday.com/2010/06/21/why-people-see-marys-face-on-cheese-sandwiches/>>

3.3 Feminism

And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. And the Lord God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.

— Genesis, 3:12-13

The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God.

— Deuteronomy 22:5

Woe to the bloody city! It is all full of lies and robbery. [...] Because of the multitude of whoredoms of the wellflavoured harlot, the mistress of witchcrafts, that selleth nations through her whoredoms, and families through her witchcrafts.

— Nahum, 3:1-4

Without a moment's hesitation, who are the two or three most important women in Christianity; the two most prominent female characters in the Bible and the Christian faith? You thought of the two Marys and perhaps of Adam's Eve, correct? Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, the woman of a questionable occupation who, according to the Bible, witnessed Jesus' crucifixion and his resurrection, and Eve, the disobedient temptress who was fooled by the serpent and got her and her mate expelled from the Paradise.

Most people think of these three because they are arguably the most prominent and/or memorable female characters in the text and have been frequently featured in Christian iconography. Given the prominence of these three females one may wonder, then, why of all ideologies it is feminism which has some major reservations towards them. When we realize, though, that Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene as well as Eve are all extreme archetypal figures, that they are stereotypes and tired tropes, and that they are emblematic of the book's and the faith's poor handling of women, the matter becomes much clearer.

In a way, Eve along with both Marys stand at two opposite ends of a scale; the scale of female sexuality, of the roles of women in society, and of the church's handling of them. Virgin Mary is just that – virginal, pure, pious, perfect. She may be Jesus' mother but from the way she is depicted she might as well be completely asexual. She is the paragon of motherhood, the model of femininity all women should strive to approach. Compared to her Mary Magdalene is representative of all the females the author(s) of the Bible found indecent

and depraved and bound to be punished. She is a bit more fleshed out than the crowds of the other “whores” featured in the Bible but this designation is still her most prominent feature. And Eve is not much better herself, personifying some anciently biased quasi-feminine qualities like foolishness and fallibility – human qualities which we see repeated in the Bible time and time again, for instance with Lot’s wife, and even outside of this text with the trope characters of Pandora or Bluebeard’s wife. Even the feline that is perennially killed by her own curiosity is a cat, and not a tom. Specifically with regard to Eve, even the authors of the new *Oxford Annotated Bible* cannot avoid mentioning that, “The disintegration of earlier connectedness [God created between men and women] is shown by the hiding of the humans from the Lord God and the tendency of the man to blame the woman (and implicitly the Lord God) for his actions.”⁵⁷

To put all of my previous words into some perspective, we may quote Christine Overall who claims in her essay “Feminism and Atheism” that, “Traditional monotheistic religions stereotype women, either putting them on a pedestal as mothers and saints or demonizing them as temptresses and whores, the source of evil that contaminates men and society. Religions have restricted women’s sexuality and required procreative conformity.”⁵⁸ Overall’s essay is a wonderful source of information on the intersection of atheism and feminism, and on the compatibility of feminism with theism – and it is one of the very few texts of this kind. Overall uses the writings of Second Wave Feminist as her springboard in order to find out why so many of them feel, “suspicious of the formally rational arguments concerning the existence of God of traditional theism,”⁵⁹ but her conclusions are just as easily applicable today.

Before we get to her main argument, though, I need to say that by this confluence of feminism and atheism I am by no means alluding to the ridiculous and rather flippant way some contemporary self-described feminists like to address the Christian God with the feminine pronoun and outright call Him Her. While – for the lack of a better word let us say – researchers such as Rachel Adler claim that, “an exclusively masculine God-language is ethically objectionable because it fosters injustice, and it is also theologically inadequate,”⁶⁰ by which she is essentially reinterpreting the scripture and misguidedly attempting to show

⁵⁷ Michael D. Coogan, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 15.

⁵⁸ Christine Overall, “Feminism and Atheism,” *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, Michael Martin, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 235.

⁵⁹ Overall, 234.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Overall, 237.

how its original meaning has to this day been concealed underneath a thick layer of masculinist assumptions, I stand with Overall who is not accepting these assumptions herself. Instead she points out that, “the attempts by some feminists to reconstruct God as feminine, as androgynous, as genderless, or as a Goddess are inadequate because they raise unanswered questions about the justification of belief in such a being.”⁶¹

Instead of giving any more space to these ludicrous notions I would like to focus on the strongest point Overall raises, which is the observation that monotheistic religions harm women. As she writes, “feminists are sharply critical of the concept of women and the status and roles attributed to them in monotheistic religions.”⁶² Indeed, it might be very hard to imagine a true believer in the equality of the sexes (regardless of what third-wave feminism / campus feminism / tumblr feminism is doing to the image of the movement these days) who would simultaneously subscribe to the same religious ideology which has historically (and in some cases even to this very day) excluded women from receiving proper education; has denied women leadership positions within the religious hierarchy such as priests, ministers, rabbis, and imams; has banned the option of birth control, abortion, and divorce;⁶³ has condemned and penalized any sort of sexual behavior outside of heterosexual marriage; has conditioned whole generations of women to think that their major or even exclusive role in life was to serve as devoted wives and mothers; and has been responsible for many other ills and atrocities ranging from forced or arranged marriages (think extreme Mormon-based sects in contemporary America) through female genital mutilations (geographically bound mostly to Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa but religiously and/or culturally connected to majority-Islamic countries) to forced adoptions (such as in early twentieth century Ireland). As Overall adds:

The second-class status traditionally allotted to women has been taken to justify sexual and procreative abuse of women and violence toward girls and women who defy religious strictures or even just fail to conform adequately. As a result, domination by men and subordination of women are not marginal, but an integral part of what has been received as mainstream, normative traditions.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Overall, 246.

⁶² Overall, 235.

⁶³ Most recently in the US: Samantha Bee, “First: Do No Harm. Second: No Pussy Stuff,” *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, accessible via Youtube <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWuGgahmP7Y>>

⁶⁴ Overall, 236.

When Mary Daly writes, “If God is male, then the male is God,”⁶⁵ conflating religious institutions with patriarchy and attempting to attack them from this angle, she is perhaps pushing the boundary a bit, but given the previous two paragraphs it is no wonder that one may draw a link between feminism and atheism. Given the admittedly problematic and debatable rise of feminism in the recent years, then, we may also dare to suggest that it is precisely this clash of opposing ideologies which is one of the key reasons the number of atheists in the US is on the rise as well.

3.4 The Lost Moral High Ground

Mike Rezendes: It's time, Robby! It's time! They knew and they let it happen! To kids! Okay? It could have been you, it could have been me, it could have been any of us. We gotta nail these scumbags! We gotta show people that nobody can get away with this. Not a priest, or a cardinal, or a freaking pope!

— Spotlight, 2015

TV Host: We now return to “Touched by an Angel”.

Lawyer [standing in a courtroom]: Now, where exactly did the angel touch you?

Boy [points to the crotch of a doll]: Here.

Angel [from behind the defendant's desk]: Oh, come on! Who are you gonna believe? I've got a freaking halo!

— Family Guy, S03E15, “Ready, Willing, and Disabled”

New Rule: Never let your children take an overnight trip with a holy man who wears more than two pieces of jewelry. Atlanta's bishop Eddie Long has been accused of buying cars for teenage boys, then inviting them to New Zealand and molesting them, in what authorities are calling “the worst Oprah surprise of all time”.

— Bill Maher, The New New Rules

When it comes to debating the drawbacks and benefits of theism versus atheism, one of the greatest trump cards religion always seemed to have up its sleeve was its monopoly on morality. Be it the Ten Commandments, the teachings of Jesus Christ, or allusions to the morality contained in the lines of various religious scriptures, for the longest time there was a link between the belief in God and leading an orderly, moral life. Non-belief was therefore conversely mistrusted, connected to immorality and the life of sin. Without sinking neck-deep into some tiringly heady and overly complicated philosophical and ethical debates, which a good number of authors, scholars, and theologians seem to be unable not to do, let us first

⁶⁵ Quoted in Overall, 236.

take a closer look at the roots of this connection. These could be traced back hundreds of years but particularly in the context of the U.S. we could quote for instance the French diplomat and one of the greatest observers of the early American way of living Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote in his book *Democracy in America*:

Zealous Christians may be found amongst us whose minds are nurtured in the love and knowledge of a future life, and who readily espouse the cause of human liberty as the source of all moral greatness. [...] By the side of these religious men I discern others whose looks are turned to the earth more than to Heaven. [...] It is natural that they should hasten to invoke the assistance of religion, for they must know that liberty cannot be established without morality, nor morality without faith.⁶⁶

Democracy in America was published in the first half of the nineteenth century. The idea of automatically conflating religious beliefs with morality had certainly been around before, though, and it remained untouched for a very long time after Tocqueville described it in his book. John Bascom, for example, wrote in his 1881 essay entitled “Atheism in Colleges”, “This evil of unbelief [...] is to be regretted, first and foremost, because of its immediate relations to spiritual truths, and secondly, because of its connection with morals.”⁶⁷ In the essay, Bascom explained his concerns about the evil of unbelief in a bit more detail. With regard to morality he divulged the following kernel of his truth:

Religion is not so much the foundation of morals, as morals the foundation of religion. Though we have often an absolute denial of the first truths of religion, we have no such denial of those of morals. Indeed, the unbeliever, more often than otherwise, takes pains to prove that the grounds of ethical conviction remain with him undisturbed. While this is hardly true, it is plainly not true that morality immediately shares the fate of religion. A complete view of our moral nature leads us to faith; but the grand facts of that nature remain, and must receive some sort of interpretation, no matter how extended our unbelief.⁶⁸

This veneer of moral superiority and ethical inviolability has soon begun to crack, though, as the power of organized religion started to significantly wane in the latter half of the twentieth

⁶⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, accessed via Project Gutenberg
<<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/815/815.txt>>

⁶⁷ Bascom, 36.

⁶⁸ Bascom, 37-38.

century and as more and more people started to think critically about their belief systems. Everything about religion began to be questioned and even the Bible suddenly found itself under scrutiny. To give an example, German philosopher Ernst Bloch complained in his 1972 book *Atheism in Christianity* about the immorality of the Ten Commandments, writing that the famous commandment, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself (Mark 12:31),”⁶⁹ “establishes egotism as the norm, and then curtails it by including one’s neighbor in one’s own self-love.”⁷⁰ Surely, nobody would consider egotism to be the pinnacle of morality. And let us not even go into any details concerning George Carlin’s opinions concerning the Ten Commandments.⁷¹

As time went on, a growing number of critics began to poke holes in the religious façade of moral authority, and I would argue that the beginning of the new millennium brought about so much critical clamor that it completely knocked religion down from its moral high horse. We have already mentioned the feminist condemnations of religious institutions and belief itself, but there was at least one more extremely important area in which the church lost the moral fight.

The area in question was the 2002 sex abuse scandal in the Boston Catholic archdiocese uncovered by the Boston Globe investigative journalists writing their spotlight story. To give a quick overview of the case, the Boston Globe began in early 2002 to publish a series of articles covering the criminal persecutions of several Roman Catholic priests in the Boston archdiocese. Mary Gail Frawley-O’Dea cites the first of these articles from January 6, 2002, which said:

Since the mid-1990s, more than 130 people have come forward with horrific tales about how former priest John J. Geoghan allegedly fondled or raped them during a three-decade spree through a half dozen Greater Boston parishes. Almost always his victims were grammar school boys. One was just four years old. ... There is no dispute that Geoghan abused children at Blessed Sacrament in Saugus after his 1962 ordination. . . . Cardinal Bernard F. Law knew about Geoghan’s problems in 1984. ... [I]n 1998, the church “defrocked” Geoghan. ... Why did it take a

⁶⁹ *Holy Bible* (China: Collins, 1991): 924.

⁷⁰ Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity* (London: Verso, 2009): 123.

⁷¹ “George Carlin – 10 Commandments,” *FFreelyThinking*, Youtube 11 November 2016, 11 November 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CE8ooMBIyC8>>

succession of three cardinals and many bishops 34 years to place children out of Geoghan's reach?⁷²

The coverage of these cases encouraged more and more victims to come forward with their own allegations of sexual abuse, and soon it became clear that this was not just a Boston problem. This was not even simply an American problem. Soon it became crystal clear that sexual abuse of minors at the hands of clergymen and the subsequent cover-up by the bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and in fact the whole ecclesiastic apparatus was a worldwide problem, thus creating a global crisis for the Church. As Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea writes in her book, "By 2004, we knew that more than forty-three hundred priests were alleged to have abused almost eleven thousand young people between 1950 and 2002."⁷³ There was no escaping this.

The ramifications of this scandal were severe. How could anyone take religious lecturing on morality seriously when something like this had been happening for decades? The moment that first spotlight article came out in the Boston Globe, the church lost its moral authority; because of this scandal it is in fact losing it to this day; and frankly, as long as the churchmen responsible not only for the scandal but also for the cover-up remain unwilling to be held accountable for it, it will be suffering the consequences for a very long time. It takes merely a cursory glance at the media landscape and one immediately sees that there is still an outcry among people about what has been happening in the church. This issue has become a part of the modern folklore and the media, but not just them, are helping to keep it alive.

Bill Maher – but not only him – has made “priests fiddling with children” a running joke on his show. The creators of the 2012 HBO documentary *Mea Maxima Culpa* claim that, “There have started to be cases, in Latin America, in the Philippines, even some in Africa and India, very slowly. They are about where the American church was in the 1960s and 1970s. There is going to be a delayed reaction in that part of the world.”⁷⁴ And last but not least, Tim Minchin has in February 2016 released a song entitled “Come Home (Cardinal Pell)” aimed at the former Australian archbishop of Sydney George Pell, one of whose verses goes as following:

⁷² Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea, *Perversion of Power: Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2007): 5.

⁷³ Frawley-O'Dea, 5-6.

⁷⁴ *Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God*, dir. Alex Gibney, prod. Sara Bernstein, screenplay Alex Gibney, 2012, 1:36:14.

Couldn't you see what was under your nose, Georgie?
Back in '73 when you were living with Gerry?
Is it true that you knew but you chose to ignore,
Or did you actively try to keep it buried?
And years later, when survivors,
Despite their shame and their fear,
Stood up to tell their stories
You spent year after year
Working hard to protect the church's assets?
I mean, with all due respect, dude,
I think you're scum!⁷⁵

The scandal has simply permeated the general public's consciousness, and thanks to the tireless efforts of various people in media spotlight it is constantly on the public's mind – wherein precisely lies the problem. The church can no longer lecture anyone about morality or advise/force people to obey their antiquated rules of decency because the moment it attempts to do that it runs the risk of facing accusations such as, "Who are you to tell me what is moral and what is not, given your own transgressions?" "Oh, you think gay marriage is indecent and in conflict with what the Bible says? Pray, tell us more about it while you keep protecting the clergymen who, under your supervision, sexually abused kids." "Do you really want to lecture me about what medical choices I can or should make as a woman, when you take seriously an institution which is, through its anti-condom campaigns in Africa, responsible for the death of who-knows-how-many people from AIDS and other diseases?" "Or how about the church's stance on sexual health, or rather on abstinence in the case of America, which has led to an avalanche of teen pregnancies and VD epidemics?" "How can anyone support a religion that left thousands of Indians die in hospitals without pain medication and proper healthcare just because, as Mother Teresa so famously said to a terminal patient coiling in agony, 'You are suffering like Christ on the cross. So Jesus must be kissing you.'?"⁷⁶ All of these are crossing the line of false equivalency, to be sure, but oftentimes when dealing with public opinions false equivalency is all one has got.

⁷⁵ Tim Minchin, "Come Home (Cardinal Pell)," *Tim Minchin, Youtube* 11 November 2016, 11 November 2016
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EtHOMforqkxk>>

⁷⁶ Christopher Hitchens, *The Missionary Position* (New York: Twelve, 2012): 44.

The New Atheists, who shall take the center stage in the following chapter, have been particularly prolific in looking up, listing, and emphasizing all of these moral dichotomies, exploiting them and blaming the church for a lot ails in the world – American slavery, the Spanish Inquisition, the witch trials, the Crusades, endless wars, misery, and bloodshed. How could an institution responsible for such atrocities also be the guardian of morality in the world? I would perhaps argue that for the most part it has not been the religious institutions which were responsible for all of these events, but rather people – selfish, power-hungry, gullible, and human. Nevertheless, religion played a part in all of this and now it is paying the price.

What about poor old morality itself, though? From which source do we draw it, then, if not from religion? Some people of faith might be wondering how are they supposed to know how to behave if religion can no longer serve as a solid foundation of their moral beliefs? In these discussions, atheism is usually seen as a threat to the well-being of the public, as something dangerous that leads to unlawfulness and despair. We may reminisce at this point about the passage from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* which argues that without faith, "nothing then would be immoral, everything would be lawful, even cannibalism."⁷⁷ Or perhaps we could take a look at Frans B. M. de Waal who elaborates on these sentiments in her essay "Prehuman Foundations of Morality":

No wonder, claiming morality as a mere product of biology is seen as a threat to religion as well as morality itself, as if such a view would absolve us from the obligation to lead virtuous lives. In a recent example, an American reverend, Al Sharpton, opined: 'If there is no order to the universe, and therefore some being, some force that ordered it, then who determines what is right or wrong? There is nothing immoral if there is nothing in charge.'⁷⁸

This is precisely where science steps in, once again begging to prove that it cannot coexist in the same space with religion, and once again posing an argument for non-belief. In the recent years multiple studies have been conducted proving that human kind does not need religion to tell its members not to steal from one another or kill each other because evolution and the laws of nature have already made sure that we as a species know that. The results of these

⁷⁷ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, accessed via Project Gutenberg
<<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/28054/28054.txt>>

⁷⁸ Frans B. M. de Waal, "Prehuman Foundations of Morality," *The Joy of Secularism*, George Levine, ed. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011):155.

studies have, of course, been oftentimes used as ammunition against religion, as a proof that we have evolved past it. Frans B. M. de Waal offers an illuminating insight into this issue when he writes:

Human morality must be quite a bit older than religion and civilization. It may, in fact, be older than humanity itself. Other primates live in highly structured social groups in which rules and inhibitions apply and mutual aid is a daily occurrence. Acts of genuine kindness do occur in animals as they do in humans, because once a tendency has been put into place by nature, it is not essential that each and every expression of it serve survival and reproduction. [...]

Without claiming other primates as moral beings, it is not hard to recognize the pillars of morality in their behavior. These pillars are summed up in our golden rule, which transcends the world's cultures and religions. 'Do unto others as you would have them do to you' brings together empathy (attention to another's feelings) and reciprocity (if others follow the same rule, you will be treated well). Human morality could not exist without empathy and reciprocity, tendencies that are recognizable in our fellow primates.⁷⁹

These words not only contradict the belief of so many theological theoreticians that human morality is so special that its very presence must be indicative of the existence of God, but more importantly they reveal that such theologically charged statements fly directly in the face of a significant amount of hard data. As Marc Hauser and Peter Singer explain, insights into the changing moral landscape of our society has historically – more often than not – not come from religion, but from reflecting on humanity and what we consider a life well lived. In this respect, "It is important for us to be aware of the universal set of moral intuitions so that we can reflect on them and, if we choose, act contrary to them. We can do this without blasphemy, because it is our own nature, not God, that is the source of our species morality."⁸⁰

In other words, if it were true that people obtain their moral values from their religion it would have to follow that the more religious the populous the less immorality, indecency, and

⁷⁹ Frans B. M. de Waal, 156.

⁸⁰ Marc Hauser and Peter Singer, "Morality Without Religion," *Queensborough Community College* 12 November 2016. 12 November 2016, accessed via <http://www.qcc.cuny.edu/SocialSciences/ppecorino/INTRO_TEXT/Chapter%208%20Ethics/Reading-Morality-without-Religion.htm>

crime there would be in the country; and conversely, the more atheist the country the more decadent and sinful and unlawful its citizens would have to be. Echoing the second chapter of this work, then, let us compare the U.S. with the Czech Republic. We will not be dealing with any anecdotal stories or personal feelings about the crime situation in each country, but rather with proper statistical data from the United States Department of State and the statistical data aggregate Nation Master, effectually qualifying morality by quantitative means.

While it is true that the Department of State warns American tourists that, “Even though the Czech Republic has a relatively low crime rate compared to other European countries, there has been a surge of residential burglaries in recent years,” predominantly warning them of thieves and pickpockets, they conclude that the country is “generally safe for the vast majority of visitors”.⁸¹ Stealing has truly been a perennial problem in the Czech Republic – one that goes against the “Thou shalt not steal” commandment and would thus support the religion-equals-morality hypothesis – but we only need to look a bit further into the world of statistics and we get a wholly different picture.

According to Nation Master, the U.S. is miles ahead from the Czech Republic when it comes to murder rates, occupying the 14th place in the list of nations with the highest numbers of intentional homicides while the Czech Republic is at the 111th.⁸² When it comes to reported rape incidents per 100,000 citizens, the U.S. also stands at number 14 while the Czech Republic is at 66.⁸³ As for the general level of criminality, the Czech Republic at the 101st place is also very much behind the United States at the 45th.⁸⁴ These kinds of data support the theory that when it comes to morality, religion is clearly not a factor.

I myself would perhaps go even further to say that the widely disseminated rebuttals of the religion-brings-about-morality argument, combined with the aforementioned instances of the church’s highly immoral behavior, not only deprived the churchmen of their moral high ground but in many cases drove people away from the religion as such. At least in the public sphere, every time a high member of the church casts a moral judgment on any particular group – for instance when American cardinal Raymond Burke opposed the current pope’s

⁸¹ “Czech Republic 2016 Crime & Safety Report,” *United States Department of State, Bureau of Diplomatic Security* 12 November 2016, 12 November 2016

<<https://www.osac.gov/pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=19029>>

⁸² “Murder Rate: Countries Compared,” *Nation Master* 12 November 2016, 12 November 2016

<<http://www.nationmaster.com/country-info/stats/Crime/Violent-crime/Murder-rate>>

⁸³ “Rape Rate: Countries Compared,” *Nation Master* 12 November 2016, 12 November 2016

<<http://www.nationmaster.com/country-info/stats/Crime/Rape-rate>>

⁸⁴ “Crime Levels: Countries Compared,” *Nation Master* 12 November 2016, 12 November 2016

<<http://www.nationmaster.com/country-info/stats/Crime/Crime-levels>>

seeming acceptance of the members of the LGBT community and warned his flock from unnamed individuals pushing a gay agenda —,⁸⁵ there is usually a nearly audible groan to be heard from atheists and oftentimes members of the church alike. Faith is now being relegated to the private sphere, to each and everybody's personal space, while at the same time being pushed out of the public arena. In there, the church has lost the battle.

3.5 Media and Globalization

Edward Walker: Who do you think will continue this place, this life? Do you plan to live forever? It is in them that our future lies, it is in Ivy and Lucius that this way of life will continue. Yes I have risked, I hope I am always able to risk everything for the just and right cause. If we did not make this decision, we could never again call ourselves innocent, and that in the end is what we have protected here, innocence!

August Nicholson: Let her go. If it ends, it ends. We can move towards hope, that's what's beautiful about this place. We cannot run from heartache. My brother was slain in the towns, the rest of my family died here. Heartache is a part of life, we know that now. Ivy is running toward hope, let her run. If this place is worthy, she'll be successful in her quest.

— The Village, 2004

When Ross Douthat was writing in his book *Bad Religion* about Christianity's relationship to other religions and he mentioned that, "a spirit of universalism carried the day [between the 1960s and 1990s as] the Baby Boom generation was significantly more likely than their parents to agree that all religions were 'basically true' [and there was] a massive decline in the proportion of youth who agreed that 'Christianity is the one true religion and everyone should be converted to it'," ⁸⁶ he was unwittingly alluding to one of the major driving forces behind the contemporary surge of atheism in the U.S. – the power of media and their part in the process of globalization.

It was precisely the time period between the sixties and the nineties that saw the rise of television. Of course, television was around before. Three of the major networks – ABC, NBC, and CBS – started broadcasting already in the forties, but it was during the 1950s and 1960s that America saw the biggest growth of this medium, including the introduction of

⁸⁵ Inés San Martín, "Cardinal Burke Denies Rift with Pope, Warns of 'Gay Agenda' for Synod," *Crux* 12 November 2016, 12 November 2016 <https://cruxnow.com/church/2015/04/01/cardinal-burke-denies-rift-with-pope-warns-of-gay-agenda-for-synod/>

⁸⁶ Douthat, 77-78.

color TV.⁸⁷ It is true that the scripted content was for a long time shackled by the infamous Hays Code, which in regard to atheism prohibited any and all depictions thereof, but I would suggest that the link between the rise of TV and the loosening of the grip religion had on the Baby Boom generation had to do with the sudden omnipresence of TV and the kinds of stories, images, and people it showed.

There is something incredibly personal about watching television so while it is definitely true that various religious minorities had been present in the U.S. before the introduction of this medium, afterwards they could no longer be otherized. Now they were no longer on the outskirts of the majority's social awareness; they were in their homes, in their living-rooms. The effect this has had on the general population was surely immense. To hear Zdeněk Sloboda describe the process, media not only produce a very specific media reality by borrowing elements from the everyday reality but, more importantly, "They are particularly potent when it comes to the cultivation of images of groups and phenomena with which we do not have many opportunities to come into direct contact; especially when these images do not contradict our own already-formed beliefs and ideologies."⁸⁸ In this way people got into close contact with other religions (perhaps making them doubt a little bit that all religions were 'basically true' and/or that their own faith was the only correct one), and apart from that, thanks to worldwide news organizations, they also got to witness all the successes as well as excesses of religion. Religious killings, wars, and scandals in particular are a very media-friendly material. As Jeremy Stolow writes in his essay "Religion, Media, and Globalization":

Simply put, the technologies, institutional arrangements, circulatory systems, and shifting modalities of reception that together make up "media" are indelibly present in any account of the growing visibility or the new political salience of religious symbols, practices, and identities on the contemporary world stage. More than just instruments used by religious, non-religious, or even anti-religious actors, media constitute an environment that makes it possible for religion to sustain a presence in both public and private life.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Mitchell Stephens, "History of Television," *Grolier Encyclopedia* 13 November 2016, 13 November 2016 <<https://www.nyu.edu/classes/stephens/History%20of%20Television%20page.htm>>

⁸⁸ Zdeněk Sloboda, "Od deviantů k rodičům: Neheterosexuální maskulinity v současných českých televizních seriálech," *Gender, rovné příležitosti, výzkum* 16.1 (2015): 23. Translation is mine.

⁸⁹ Jeremy Stolow, "Religion, Media, and Globalization," *Sociology of Religion*, Bryan S. Turner, ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010): 544.

The abandonment of the Hays Code – a set of strict moral guidelines applied to most United States motion pictures released by major Hollywood studios from 1930 to 1968, which was named after the then-president of Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America Will H. Hays – along with the advent of the internet, which brought about globalization on a completely unprecedented scale, only accelerated this process of relativizing religion as well as bringing more awareness to the issue of atheism. Jeremy Stolow, for instance, explains that ever since the advent of television, and particularly since the explosion of the internet and online media, “A more global perspective on politics and culture has required more serious consideration to non-Western traditions and theologies.”⁹⁰ Damian Amana, the author of “The Remediation of Religion in a Visual Culture” adds a twist to this point when he writes:

Modern man sees himself through the optics of his media. We understand ourselves as the reconstituted station point of the artist or the photographer. When we watch a film or a television broadcast, we become the changing point of view of the camera. This does not imply an inescapable technological determinism but that we employ media as vehicles for defining both personal and cultural identity. New media offer new opportunities for self-definition.⁹¹

Now, what if a character in a film or a TV show that a person is watching happens to be an atheist? In the pre-Hays era such a thing would be completely out of the question, but in the recent years the number of TV and film atheists has grown exponentially. On the silver screen we have had for example Jodie Foster’s character in *Contact* or Will Smith’s Robert Neville in *I Am Legend*; in the realm of scripted television there has been Dexter Morgan on *Dexter*, Fox Mulder on *The X-Files*, Jen Lindley on *Dawson’s Creek*, Kurt Hummel on *Glee*, Frank Underwood on *House of Cards*, Piper Chapman on *Orange Is the New Black*, Jeff Winger on *Community*, or various other characters on *Numb3rs*, *The Following*, *The Walking Dead* or *Six Feet Under* who have been explicitly labelled as atheists and/or even had storylines written for them revolving around their absence of religious beliefs. On TV shows in particular screenwriters seem to be pushing the idea of the juxtaposition of faith and science, suggesting that whoever is or wants to be smart cannot believe in God at the same time. This is evidenced by the storylines, opinions, and indeed the very existence of characters such as Christina Yang on *Grey’s Anatomy*, Dr. Gregory House on *House M.D.*, Professor Farnsworth

⁹⁰ Douthat, 78.

⁹¹ Damien Amana, “The Remediation of Religion in a Visual Culture: Understanding the Interaction of Media, New Religious Experience and Globalization,” *Journal of Cultural and Media Studies* 2.2 (2014): 26.

on *Futurama*, Dr. Temperance Brennan on *Bones*, Sheldon Cooper on *The Big Bang Theory*, Dr. Cox on *Scrubs*, or Sherlock Holmes on both *Sherlock* and *Elementary*.

One has to wonder if this crowd of atheist media examples might have left some people wondering about their own faith. Especially now when it is not just TV shows and films which have been providing opportunities to an incredible number of people to either share their atheist opinions with the rest of America (or the world) or to flat out bash religion in the name of atheism. George Carlin was a loud sceptic of religion with an enormous media platform in whose steps now walk comedians and social critics the likes of Bill Burr, Jim Jeffries, Chelsea Handler, Seth MacFarlane, Bill Maher, Kathy Griffin, or, if we were to really consider the comedic scene a fully globalized affair, Ricky Gervais, Stephen Fry, Tim Minchin, Dylan Moran, or Eddie Izzard. Furthermore, atheism is regularly being discussed on the news; Bill Maher has been attacking religion and promoting atheism on his shows for more than two decades now; comedy programs such as *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, *Full Frontal*, *The Nightly Show* or *Last Week Tonight* have shown segments dealing with atheist topics; the New Atheists have no problem going around the media circle when advertising their books to the American public, giving interviews left and right; even the internet is full of American atheists, as evidenced by the existence of channels like *The Amazing Atheist*, *The Atheist Voice* or *The Rubin Report*, spreading their message of non-belief and criticizing religion for all the evil things they felt it is responsible for.

Glancing at the wall of titles and names in the previous paragraphs we may notice an interesting connection to an issue mentioned in the second chapter. Most of the aforementioned TV shows and channels as well as most of the artists – if not all of them – are skewering young viewers. They tailor their output in such a way that it attracts younger crowds, ideally people in the 14-39 demographic which is the most coveted one among advertisers because it is also the group most willing to spend their money on the products advertised. Like moths attracted to flames, these young people watch these shows. They laugh as the comedians poke holes in religious dogmas and nod their heads as the hosts present their anti-religious arguments, and fall in love with all the characters who just happen to be atheists. This may very well be one of the reasons, then, why right now, “the drop in Christian affiliation is particularly pronounced among young adults.”⁹² It certainly is one of the reasons

⁹² Alan Cooperman, Gregory Smith, and Katherine Ritchey, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” *Pew Research Center* 14 October 2016, 14 October 2016 <<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>>

why I chose to include so many quotes in the headers of chapters and subchapters of this work which were taken from American films and television shows. If there is anything omnipresent in the American culture nowadays, it is atheists in the media.

Let us not forget, though, that this is in no way a recent development. Media has been used as a tool for spreading atheism and/or critique of religion for a very long time, be it newspapers (we have already discussed the potential effects of the Boston Globe spotlight articles and the like), radio (Madalyn Murray O'Hair has founded her own radio station), TV (we have also mentioned O'Hair's numerous appearances on television, one of which was the one on *The Phil Donahue Show*), or indeed the internet, which has worked as a catalyst for much of this change. Thanks to all of these venues, atheism is no longer the shameful thing it may have once been. Media has helped uncover a lot of negative messages about the church, has helped with the spreading of information which undermined the very foundations of belief, and also presented atheism as a valid life choice.

While it is undebatable that the media has functioned as a double-edged sword and has just as well been used to spread religious messages – here, we could quote Jeremy Stolow's words, "It is within and through mediated environments that so-called religious folk increasingly carry out their business of seeking knowledge, performing rituals, proclaiming faith, proselytizing to others, embarking on moral campaigns, or engaging in holy wars,"⁹³ and mention the Pentecostal prayer rallies, jihadi websites, or the recent wave of Christian-themed Hollywood films such as *God Is Not Dead*, *Do You Believe?*, *War Room*, or *Son of God* – it seems undeniable that the overall effect media has had on the strength of religious beliefs among Americans has not been a positive one.

In fact, the very opposite seems to be the truth. The Pentecostal rallies have had their fair share of media exposure but they have been mocked *ad nauseum*; and the aforementioned films not only do not have a large audience but they also tend to be panned by critics as well as ordinary moviegoers themselves. Meanwhile, *Family Guy* is currently in its 13th season; *Real Time with Bill Maher* is in its 14th season and still going strong ratings-wise; the number of atheist characters on television shows and in films seems to be on the rise, just like the number of comedians who openly mock religion and its various practices; and perhaps most tellingly there was that lady on the news.

⁹³ Stolow, 544.

It was May 2013. The city of Moore, Oklahoma, had just been ravaged by a tornado and CNN's very own Wolf Blitzer was conducting an interview with one of the disaster-stricken local residents. Because this is contemporary news we are talking about, the interview was taking place in front of a pile of rubble and the local resident was a twenty-something mother holding her toddler in her arms. Her name was Rebecca Vitsmun and most of the conversation revolved around her decision to quickly leave her house before it was flattened by the tornado. In the short clip from the very end of the interview, which was later circulated all over the internet, the following exchange was heard:

WOLF: Well, you're blessed. Brian, your husband, is blessed. [Your son] is blessed. We're happy you're here. You guys did a great job and I guess you gotta thank the Lord, right? Do you thank the Lord? For that split-second decision?

REBECCA: I-I-I'm... I'm actually an atheist.

WOLF: Oh, you are? OK... [both laughing] But you made the right call.

REBECCA: Yeah, yeah, we are here and, you know, I don't blame anybody for thanking the Lord.⁹⁴

As hilariously cringe-worthy as this exchange may have been, what is worth pointing out is that while this was a regular woman from the middle of America – not to mention from the Bible Belt – whose self-professed atheism did not go unnoticed, her admission of un-belief nevertheless did not cause any outrage. Having transcended religious and political affiliations, there were no letters, no boycotts, nobody was offended. Even today, judging by viewers' ratings on the various mirror clips of this video, the overwhelming majority of people have a positive response to this woman and the set of beliefs she holds or does not hold. Even a couple of decades ago this would not have been the case. Now, thanks to media and their ability to give voice to all the things we have mentioned in this chapter, this Oklahoma resident could be on national news telling everyone that she did not really believe in God, and nobody even batted an eye. As a wise woman once said, "The world is changing: I feel it in the water, I feel it in the earth, and I smell it in the air."⁹⁵

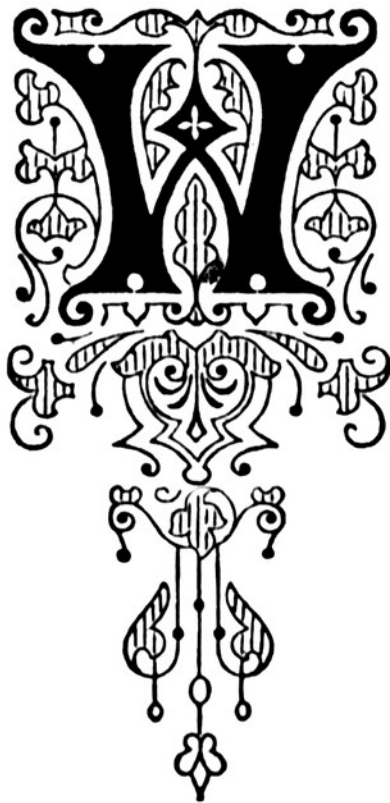
⁹⁴ Jessica Ravitz, "This Oklahoma Atheist Isn't Thanking the Lord," *Belief Blog* 15 November 2016, 15 November 2016 <<http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/05/22/this-oklahoma-atheist-isnt-thanking-the-lord/>>

⁹⁵ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005): 981.

Hannah: At first it can be very hard to accept how disappointing life is, Harper, because that's what it is and you have to accept it. With faith and time and hard work you reach a point... where the disappointment doesn't hurt as much, and then it gets actually easy to live with. Quite easy.

— Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*

Chapter 4 The New Atheism



e cannot discuss the contemporary state of American atheism without also mentioning the one branch of it the majority of people would probably associate with it if they were asked – the New Atheism. To have at least a basic idea about what this term might mean before we start to fully explore this issue, it might be helpful to quote Victor J. Stenger’s book aptly titled *The New Atheism* in which he places the beginnings of this phenomenon to the year 2004, which saw the publication of, “a series of best sellers by authors who preached a more militant, in-your-face kind of atheism that had not been seen before, except with the abrasive and unpopular Madalyn Murray O’Hair. [...] New Atheism seems to be a growing phenomenon in the United States and has attracted much media attention.”¹

It is important not to omit New Atheists since they are one of the main reasons the issue of non-belief has seeped into the general consciousness. They are loud; they are in equal parts brash, rude, and audacious; they love debating about religion and take no prisoners when building up scathing arguments about it; and last but not least they are one of the main reasons a lot of people do not like atheists very much in America today. In a way, New Atheists in all their anger managed to alienate a lot of people and drive them away from the selfsame cause they were attempting to promote.

Let us not get too much ahead of ourselves, though. While the New Atheism is a matter of the new millennium, its roots reach much further than that. Before we start talking about people such as Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett or Christopher Hitchens we

¹ Victor J. Stenger, *The New Atheism* (New York: The Prometheus Books, 2009): 25.

need to lay a little bit of foundation and shed some light on the pre-2000 cultural landscape which cleared the ground for the arrival of the aforementioned “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”.

4.1 Republicans and Christian Fundies

*I'm taking the stand in defense of the fence.
I got a little band playing tributes to ambivalence.
We divide the world into liberals and gun-freaks,
Into atheists and fundies,
Into tee-tot'lers and junkies,
Into chemical and natural,
Into fictional and factual,
Into science and supernatural,
But it's actually naturally not that white and black.*

— Tim Minchin, “The Fence”

In the previous chapter we have covered several topics which New Atheists would later use as the building blocks of their anti-religious rhetoric, namely the oftentimes overlooked interference of religion in public school curricula and the handling of federal or public funds, the anti-female and non-scientific nature of some parts of all monotheistic religions, as well as the relatively recent loss of the moral high ground of the church. There is one more issue which we have not yet mentioned, though – the rise of Christian fundamentalism and the slow but sure dissolution of the separation between church and state. While I do believe that both of these may have in certain respect helped to tar the name of religion in the eyes of some Americans – and perhaps even made some of them think twice before going to church again – I do not truly consider them the roots of modern atheism in America, hence their inclusion here instead of in Chapter 3.

In a series of articles published in *The Public Opinion Quarterly* Louis Bolce and Gerald de Maio offer a brilliant overview pertinent to our discussion of both the past and present political and religious landscape in the U.S. In these articles they deal with Christian fundamentalism and its effect on American politics. Before we start discussing all of that, thought, we need to reclaim the word “fundamentalist”.

Today the term “fundamentalist” is being used by the New Atheists mainly in association with Islamic terrorists, but as Bolce and Maio point out it is originally a Christian term. The idea of can be traced back to the late nineteenth century when a movement was born within American evangelical Protestantism in reaction to what the Protestants perceived as modernist tendencies in Christianity. The term itself was then, “coined in 1920 by Curtis Lee Laws, a Baptist editor, to rally supporters of the movement to preserve the fundamental truths of Christianity, such as the transcendent and inerrant authority of the Scriptures.”²

It is important to point out that in the context of America these Christian fundamentalists kept to themselves for a long time, not wishing to take any part in the political process. And even when they did, they got burnt so badly that they vowed never to attempt anything like that again. As Samantha Bee and her team of writers explain in one of their most inspired segments about the involvement of American evangelicals in the world of politics, “After the twin national embarrassments of prohibition and the Scopes ‘Monkey’ trial, evangelicals took a fifty-year break from the grubby world of politics.”³ Politics was considered a dirty and ungodly business in which no Christian should be involved, politicians in particular being viewed rather unfavorably as twofaced liars and cheats. American Southern Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell even went on to criticize Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.’s involvement in politics claiming that, “Preachers are not called upon to be politicians, but soul winners.”⁴ But that was in 1965.

By the time the seventies rolled around a lot of things have changed. Firstly, the 1973 Supreme Court verdict in *Roe v. Wade* made abortion legal; and secondly, religious leaders such as Jerry Falwell or Paul Weyrich realized that they cannot build a successful career and cash in a pile of easy money on preaching the word of Jesus alone (Brave old world before the televangelists!). To this end, says Professor of Religion Randall Balmer, after already having mobilized their evangelical base thanks to their support of school segregation, “They held a conference call to discuss the prospect of other political activities. Several people suggested possible issues, and finally a voice on the end of one of the lines said: ‘How about

² Louis Bolce and Gerard de Maio, “The Religious Outlook, Culture Wars and Antipathy Toward Christian Fundamentalists,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 63.1 (1999): 30.

³ Samantha Bee, “The Religious Right: Part 1,” *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, Youtube 16 November 2016, 16 November 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2zY3Ez83bo>>

⁴ Quoted in Michael Wolraich, *Blowing Smoke: Why the Right Keeps Serving Up Whack-job Fantasies about the Plot to Euthanize Grandma, Outlaw Christmas, and Turn Junior Into a Raging Homosexual* (Cambridge: De Capo Press, 2010): 32.

abortion?”⁵ The problem was that most evangelical leaders still did not want to have anything to do with these political or politicized issues. For them, the dirty political arena was still a space they had no desire to enter.

In other words, Falwell and the rest needed to talk them into it, which they did thanks to some expressive clips and films directed by Frank Schaeffer and the conservative politician Jack Kemp. As Schaeffer explains, “[Kemp] brought in fifty congressmen and senators, including Henry Hyde and Bob Dole and a bunch of other people, and gave it a lot of respectability.”⁶ Thus, religious right leaders the likes of Falwell and Paul Weyrich found a common ground with the American political representatives and as Samantha Bee adds, “Having gotten abortion into the Republican platform and evangelical churches, religious right leaders like Jerry Falwell spent the next two decades relentlessly pushing the message that abortion caused everything from breast cancer to 9/11.”⁷

I am well aware that in the paragraphs above I am conflating the terms “evangelicals” and “fundamentalists”. Nonetheless, in this respect I am only following the example of Bolce and Maio who argue that while it is true that up to 1988 Christian fundamentalists were linked by the general public to extreme religiosity and controversial moral issues, people did not see them as crossing the line into conventional partisan politics. Echoing Samantha Bee’s *Full Frontal*, elaborating on her arguments and adding more details to them, they write:

Religious controversy, evangelical political activism, and conflicts over abortion, prayer in school, and gay rights were viewed as skirmishes taking place on the fringes of the political and ideological mainstream. All this appears to have changed by 1992. [...] That year Christian fundamentalists were viewed (and acted) as ideological partisans (i.e., conservative Republicans) doing battle with liberals, feminists, gays, Democrats, and environmentalists. The principal effect of 1992 was to bind evangelicals to the Republican Party. These associations continued into the 1994 and 1996 election cycles. Indeed, now many non-fundamentalists had begun to worry that the GOP was being “hijacked” by fundamentalists.

⁵ Samantha Bee, “The Religious Right: Part 2,” *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, Youtube 16 November 2016, 16 November 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPsderlzd6c>>

⁶ “The Religious Right: Part 2.”

⁷ “The Religious Right: Part 2.”

The association of fundamentalists with cultural orthodoxy and religious and moral controversy did not change over this time span. What did change was that Christian fundamentalists had become popularly associated with the Republican Party. This linkage seems to have persisted through the 1996 presidential election, despite the attempt by presidential nominee Bob Dole and Republican convention organizers to distance their candidate from being seen as too cozy with religious conservatives and too closely identified with controversial religious and moral stances.⁸

This association of the (fundamentalist) Christian elements with the Republican Party remained even in later years. Whether it be heated conversations about abortion, prayer in schools, LGBT rights (gay marriage, gays in the military, or lately trans rights and the so-called bathroom bills), immigration from Muslim-majority countries, etc., it seems that Republican politicians cannot form a single sentence without using the words “Christian” or “Jesus” in it.⁹ Considering the secularized, enlightened pillars on which the Founding Fathers build the country, then, it seems rather inappropriate for them to do so. As Bolce and Maio reveal, “The heightened prominence of Christian fundamentalists in news accounts about Christian Right clout in the Republican party, we believe, has grabbed the attention of a significant segment of the public and has led those who intensely dislike Christian fundamentalists to some politically relevant opinion formation.”¹⁰

In this respect I would not only agree with their conclusion about the public taking part in some “politically relevant opinion formation”, but also suggest that the increase of fundamentalist meddling in politics may have turned a significant amount of people away from faith itself. After all, it is hard to believe that not a single person would mind being associated with labels such as “Bible-thumping”, “mean-spirited”, “merchants of hate and intolerance” and “evangelical theocracy”.¹¹ These words were certainly the wind in the sails of New Atheists who have been using them tirelessly and with much glee, drawing attention to all of these problematic points of contact.

⁸ “The Religious Outlook, Culture Wars and Antipathy Toward Christian Fundamentalists,” 47-48.

⁹ Particularly when it comes to the Christian (as well as secular) arguments against the LGBT community, I warmly recommend John Corvino, “What’s Morally Wrong with Homosexuality? (Full DVD Video),” *Youtube* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iXA_0MED98>

¹⁰ Louis Bolce and Gerard de Maio, “The Anti-Christian Fundamentalist Factor in Contemporary Politics,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 63.4 (1999): 509-510.

¹¹ “The Anti-Christian Fundamentalist Factor in Contemporary Politics,” 512.

In fact, I would argue that all of the issues we discussed both here and in the previous chapter – the influence of religion on public school curricula, the church’s problems with women, the juxtaposition of religion and science in an increasingly secularized world, the emergence of anti-religious commentators and programs, the rise of the Christian Right, and so on – were bubbling up under the lid of American culture. For decades, the pressure was rising – the pressure of atheism, of dissatisfaction with organized religion, of crisis of faith. All of this pressure needed some release, and indeed it came. It came suddenly one September morning.

4.2 The New Atheism

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.

— Ecclesiastes 1:9

When one attempts to find a definition of New Atheism, one quickly realizes how thin the line is between this “new” kind of atheism and atheism “proper”. The distinctions usually boil down to some vague statements to the effect of, “It is much harsher and more punishing in tone than all other atheist writings were before,” and, “It was motivated by the 9/11 attacks,” or to the list of the four big names generally associated with it – the so-called “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens. Indeed, this is precisely what Victor J. Stenger does in his book *The New Atheism*. In the first line of the preface he writes about Sam Harris’s *The End of Faith* that the book, “marked the first of a series of six best-selling books that took a harder line against religion than had been the custom among secularists. [...] Motivated primarily by the events of September 11, 2001, which he laid directly at the feet of the religion of Islam, Harris did not leave Christianity or Judaism off the hook.”¹²

To think that New Atheism actually brought anything new to the table would be to overlook the plethora of examples from all those decades and even centuries before; all those atheists whose rhetoric was no different from that of these newcomers. In this work alone we have already mentioned Ernst Bloch and George Carlin, discussed at length the contributions

¹² Stenger, 11.

of Madalyn Murray O'Hair and alluded to the 19th century "Great Agnostic" Robert Green Ingersoll as well as some earlier European thinkers. To put it differently, the New Atheism is new in the name only. That does not mean, however, that it has no characteristics or that the term is completely vacuous. In fact there are plenty of goals New Atheists are trying to achieve and plenty of tactics they are using to do so.

The New Atheists are constantly reiterating the same points their predecessors have in the decades past; the same points we have covered in the previous chapter. Firstly, as Victor J. Stenger writes, "The New Atheists write mainly from a scientific perspective."¹³ Here, we can quote Richard Dawkins, for instance, who famously said, "I am a scientist, and I believe there is a profound contradiction between science and religious belief. There is no well-demonstrated reason to believe in god and I think that the idea of a divine creator belittles the elegant reality of the universe."¹⁴

To this I would like to add that Dawkins and the rest of the New Atheists not only prefer this scientific perspective but they also refuse any suggestion that science and religion may occupy the same space. We have already tackled this issue in Chapter 3, but in this specific case it takes on the form of discussions about NOMA.

NOMA, apart from injecting terror into the hearts of all people who have ever wandered into the dark, obscure, infectious-disease-related corners of *Medical Encyclopedia*,¹⁵ is an acronym for "non-overlapping magisteria" – a term coined by Stephen Jay Gould whose purpose is to serve as "a solution to the false conflict between science and religion."¹⁶ According to this proposal, as Michael Paul Gallagher explains, "Science is out of its depth in realms of ultimate meaning or value and should recognize this, just as religion is out of its depth in matters of empirical research. Thus we have different and autonomous levels of questioning and answering, which do not overlap, and do not have to clash with one another."¹⁷

The New Atheists are, of course, skeptical of this proposal – to say the least. Richard Dawkins devotes a whole subchapter to this term in his book. In an attempt to undermine and

¹³ Stenger, 13.

¹⁴ *The Root of All Evil?* Dir. Russell Barnes. Screenplay Richard Dawkins. Prod. Alan Clements. Channel 4, 2006, 1:08.

¹⁵ "Noma," *Medline Plus* 16 November 2016, 16 November 2016
<<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001342.htm>>

¹⁶ Michael Paul Gallagher, "Revisiting New Atheism," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 101.401 (2012): 61.

¹⁷ Gallagher, 61.

mock this very idea he offers ad hominem attacks (“What expertise can theologians bring to deep cosmological questions that scientists cannot?”¹⁸), vague open questions (“But if science cannot answer some ultimate question, what makes anybody think that religion can?”¹⁹), flippant attempts at sarcastic humor (“It is a tedious cliché – and, unlike many clichés, it isn’t even true – that science concerns itself with how questions, but only theology is equipped to answer why questions. What on earth is a why question? Not every English sentence beginning with the word ‘why’ is a legitimate question. Why are unicorns hollow? Some questions simply do not deserve an answer.”²⁰), and a quasi-intellectual takes on the woulda-coulda-shoulda proposition (“NOMA is only popular because there is no evidence to favor the God Hypothesis. The moment there was the smallest suggestion of any evidence in favor of religious belief, religious apologists would lose no time in throwing NOMA out of the window.”²¹). This is all he has got.

Apart from their distaste for the non-scientific nature of religion, the New Atheists also seem to drag science into discussions where its presence may not be entirely necessary or justified. In one of the many examples we could find in Daniel Dennett’s work, he uses evolutionary biology to provide, “an explanatory framework for what we might call the genealogy of theology,”²² Christopher Hitchens devotes a whole chapter to discredit and mock the whole concept of miracles writing, “In much the same way as prophets and seers and great theologians seem to have died out, so the age of miracles seems to lie somewhere in our past. If the religions were wise, or had the confidence of their convictions, they ought to welcome the eclipse of this age of fraud and conjuring. But faith, yet again, discredits itself by proving to be insufficient to satisfy the faithful,”²³ and Richard Dawkins uses textual analysis to prove that the Bible is, “just plain weird, as you would expect of a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents, composed, revised, translated, distorted and ‘improved’ by hundreds of anonymous authors, editors and copyists, unknown to us and mostly unknown to each other, spanning nine centuries.”²⁴

While I personally agree with many of their points and conclusions – these or other ones which were left unmentioned – I still have to wonder what their point is. What purpose does it

¹⁸ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Richmond: Black Swan, 2006): 79.

¹⁹ Dawkins, 80.

²⁰ Dawkins, 80.

²¹ Dawkins, 83.

²² Daniel C. Dennett, “Atheism and Evolution,” *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, Michael Martin, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 147.

²³ Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007): 140.

²⁴ Dawkins, 268.

serve if you use scientific methods to prove to a person that their beliefs do not have a scientific basis? That is why they call them beliefs. Unless that person is forcing creationism down other people's throats, let them believe in it. Why force them to accept evolution? If they want to believe that the Bible was either written by God or at least that God had inspired others to write it, that is fine. If that person is not using the book to justify some morally, ethically or socially unacceptable form of behavior, why should anyone look down on others and mock them for their faith? Why should anyone scold them for the ethical breaches of others?

The last two points are particularly interesting in the context of the fact that, secondly, the New Atheists also attack the moral high ground world religions have occupied for a long time, and argue that morality as such is not to be derived from as immoral an institution as the church is. To hear Victor J. Stenger say it, "We do not see morality as God-given but rather the result of humanity's own social development."²⁵

To give another example, Richard Dawkins quotes in his book *The God Delusion* the professor of anesthesiology at the State University of New York John Hartung, who argues that, "The Bible is a blueprint of in-group morality, complete with instructions for genocide, enslavement of out-groups, and world domination."²⁶ It is interesting because, ironically enough, the New Atheists seem to be attempting to knock the church down from the perceived high horse while at the same time trying to get up on it themselves. The problem is that while they desire to abandon the church and get rid of it, they do not really offer much in place of it.

The New Atheists reject the very idea of God, "as some kind of object out there, or else as an unnecessary explanation for things. There is the oft-quoted remark of Laplace to Napoleon answering a question about the role of God in his scientific system: 'Sire, I have no need for that hypothesis.'"²⁷ For all of their rejection of traditional deities, though, Philip Kitcher shares in his chapter in *The Joy of Secularism* entitled "Challenges for Secularism" the following evaluation of their work:

Darwinian atheists, among whom I include Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, neither offer the best arguments against

²⁵ Stenger, 14.

²⁶ Dawkins, 293.

²⁷ Gallagher, 58.

belief in the supernatural nor pay much attention to the challenges for secularism: it is enough for them to demolish, and they pay too little attention to questions that might arise for erstwhile believers after the demolition is done.²⁸

Finally, the one characteristic which according to most definitions distinguishes the New Atheists from their predecessors, the one feature even I have mentioned in the first place in the opening of this subchapter, is the harsh and punishing tone of the New Atheism. While Paul Cliteur writes that, “the New Atheists have stimulated an enormous debate on the merits of theism that contrast favorably with the woolly self-complacent abstractions of the liberal theologians that set the tone in the 1960s and 1970s,”²⁹ I would like to add that when it comes to contrasting the woolly self-complacent abstractions of the 1960s and 1970s the New Atheists have overshot the mark. No, not overshot; they have absolutely obliterated it.

Channeling his inner Bill Maher, who once claimed that, “I certainly honestly believe religion is detrimental to the progress of humanity. You know, it's just selling an invisible product. It's too easy,”³⁰ Victor J. Stenger describes this major pillar of the New Atheism in much more detail when he writes:

One of the significant propositions of New Atheism is that faith should not be exonerated, should not be treated with respect, but rather disputed and, when damaging to individuals or society, condemned. In fact, we should call faith exactly what it is—absurd. The new atheists argue that faith is far from a benign force that can simply be tolerated by those who know better. Rather, it plays a significant role in much of the violent conflict in the world. Furthermore, faith results in the disregarding of important values such as freethinking and objective truth seeking that are needed to solve the problems in modern society.³¹

In an attempt to give religious extremism its due, they have in a way become extremists in their own right, always portraying mankind on the brink of extinction, always reveling in blood-soaked horrors of both the past and the present, always invoking the memories of the dead and the images of the suffering to prove that all facets of religion are either false or evil.

²⁸ Phillip Kitcher, “Challenges for Secularism,” *The Joy of Secularism*, George Levine, ed. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011): 24.

²⁹ Paul Cliteur, *The Secular Outlook: In Defense of Moral and Political Secularism* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010): 42.

³⁰ *Religulous*, dir. Larry Charles, prod. Bill Maher and Jonah Smith, screenplay by Bill Maher (Lions Gate and Thousand Words, 2008): 1:31.

³¹ Stenger, 46.

Michael Paul Gallagher brilliantly explains the central tenets of the New Atheist movements in his essay “Revisiting the New Atheism”:

The polemic of the New Atheists against religious faith involves two battlefronts: the irrationality or falsity of all religious truth, and a vehement moral protest against the evils committed by religion. On the second front they enjoy themselves recounting horror stories of religious fanaticism or of abuse of various kinds. Unfortunately, there are shameful shadows of scandal in religious history, but all religion cannot be equated with such tragic failures and distortions. These two main critiques remain so oblivious of the intellectual riches of theology and so naïve about history that a more cultural question arises. How could such simplistic stances become acceptable and even convincing for such a huge audience today?³²

I believe Gallagher answers his own question in the very sentence he poses it: These stances have become acceptable and even convincing to so many people precisely because they are so simplistic and easy to grasp. They are straightforward, drawing a single parallel between a number of terrible events and blaming them all on one clearly defined baddie: religion. To offer a counterpoint, I would like to present an argument shared by the American author and religious studies scholar Reza Aslan on *The Daily Show with John Stewart* in May 2015:

There is obviously a serious problem with religious violence in the world – particularly with Islam and in the Middle East – but if you’re gonna blame religion for violence in the name of religion, you’re gonna have to credit religion for every act of compassion in the name of religion. You have to credit religion for every act of love in the name of religion. And that’s not what people usually think. They focus very much on the negatives.

Part of the problem is that there is this misconception that people derive their values from their scriptures, and the truth is that it’s more often the case that people insert their values into their scriptures. Otherwise, every Christian who read the Bible would read it exactly the same way.³³

³² Gallagher, 59.

³³ “The Daily Show – Reza Aslan,” *Comedy Central, Youtube* 16 November 2016, 16 November 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipfgfTtqq2c>>

The New Atheists refuse to even acknowledge this point, instead continuing to list all the different atrocities conducted in the name of religion. Christopher Hitchens is an excellent example of this technique of faith-bashing. Perhaps it is because of his background in journalism or perhaps he is just a bad writer who cannot hold a cohesive thought for more than a minute, but in his book *God Is Not Great* he is constantly jumping from one instance of religious bloodshed to another, piling them on top of one another, always attempting to dig up more and more gruesome examples of people suffering under the thumb of the church or killing one another because of some long-gestating religious conflict. Thus, he can be writing about the Crusades and the Inquisition on page 229 only to abandon these topics for bloodthirsty Nazis and Stalinists on page 230. Then, as soon as he loses interest in the Third Reich, he moves on to the god-like dictators of “the oriental monarchies of China or India or Persia, or the empires of the Aztec or the Incas,”³⁴ and on the next page readers suddenly find him ruminating about George Orwell and his writings on totalitarian theocracies. When readers finally get to the end of the book, Hitchens serves them an overwritten passage about transcending our prehistory and escaping “the gnarled hands which reach out to drag us back to the catacombs and reeking altars and the guilty pleasures of subjection and abjection,”³⁵ which leaves them more confused than anything else. One feeling remains, though: After all those lists of violent incidents, wars, killings, ethical offences and moral lapses, readers are left with a sense of distaste. Distaste for religion, for atheism, and for all writings about these topics.

When it comes to listing bloodsheds, though, Christopher Hitchens is not the only perpetrator. Sam Harris was in fact the first one to overemphasize – in much more elegant terms – the destructive nature of religion. In his 2005 book *The End of Faith* he wrote:

There seems to be a problem with some of our most cherished beliefs about the world: they are leading us, inexorably, to kill one another. A glance at history, or at the pages of any newspaper, reveals that ideas which divide one group of human beings from another, only to unite them in slaughter, generally have their roots in religion. It seems that if our species ever eradicates itself through war, it will not be because it was written in the stars but because it was written in our

³⁴ Hitchens, 231.

³⁵ Hitchens, 283.

books; it is what we do with words like “God” and “paradise” and “sin” in the present that will determine our future.³⁶

Harris was soon followed by Dennett, Dawkins, and all the rest of the New Atheists such as the likes of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Lawrence M. Krauss, Julia Galef, David Silverman, Ibn Warraq, Steven Pinker, Michael Shermer, Matt Dillahunty, A. C. Grayling, Aaron Ra, Jerry Coyne, James Randi or Michel Onfray. Even Victor J. Stenger could not help himself and created a condensed list of the “religious highlights”, if you will. In a subchapter entitled “Historical Horrors” he cites journalist James A. Haught and his list of atrocities committed in the name of one God or another. These include the First Crusades, the Second Crusade, the Third Crusade, the Inquisition, the Salem trials, American slavery, the Thirty Years’ War, the bloodshed in Ulster, Islamic jihadists, killings between Islamists and Hindus, killings of Islamists by Buddhists monks in Myanmar, and so on and so forth.³⁷ The point of this list is – as is the usual case – to juxtapose all of these religiously motivated killings (debatable) to the absence of them on the atheist side of things in order to prove that religion leads only to death while atheism does not.

As an argument this technique certainly works. All of Christian history has, thanks to the New Atheists, suddenly become suspect; it has been in their hands rewritten so that all of the negatives are emphasized now while all of the positives are either brushed aside or outright omitted. When you hear the word religion nowadays, you do not think of the ingeniousness of medieval architecture, of religiously-themed art, or of smiling nuns in church hospitals. Instead, images of jihadists cutting off people’s heads come to mind, or pedophile priests, or the outrageous views of the Pat Robertsons of the world, or the church’s meddling in the questions of women’s health and sex lives, etc. As Ross Douthat put it in *Bad Religion*, “The Crusades were just an excuse for pogroms and genocide; Martin Luther was an eliminationist anti-Semite avant la letter; Pius XII was Hitler’s Pope. All you needed to know about the fathers of the Church was that John Chrysostom preached vituperously against the Jews; all you needed to know about the Catholic Church was that it backed the Spanish inquisition.”³⁸

In this sense, the New Atheism deserves to be applauded for shedding light on some of the greatest religious overreaches, some of the biggest missteps and errors of the church, some

³⁶ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (New York: Free Press, 2006): 12.

³⁷ Stenger, 111-113.

³⁸ Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion* (New York: Free Press, 2012): 76.

of its most heinous crimes. When you have a book in the center of your religion which casually talks about turning “rivers to blood”³⁹ it seems that no amount of charity work and dispersion of hope would make people forget that, particularly after having been shown evidence of this passage actually being executed. The New Atheists also deserve to be commended for placing all of these issues in context, and for bringing the atheist movement into the mainstream, helping a lot of American atheists realize that they are not alone. In spite of all of that, however, when I called the New Atheists extremists of sorts in the opening paragraphs of this subchapter, I was not really exaggerating.

Attacking religious killings and various cases of religious extremism is one thing – we should all be on board with that – but the New Atheists make it a point for themselves to attack not just the extremists but also the religious moderates. They argue that the moderates in particular are the biggest part of the problem, and are in very clear terms clamoring for a complete eradication of all traces of religion from all cultures all around the world. All religion is the enemy for them, even that which poses no threat and does no harm to anybody. Daniel Dennett, for example, writes in *Breaking the Spell* that in the world of religion, “people are dying and killing, with the moderates cowed into silence by the intransigence of the radicals in their own faiths, and many afraid to acknowledge what they actually believe for fear of breaking Granny's heart, or offending their neighbors to the point of getting run out of town, or worse.”⁴⁰ As for Sam Harris, he could not agree more:

One of the central themes of this book is that religious moderates are themselves the bearers of a terrible dogma: they imagine that the path to peace will be paved once each of us has learned to respect the unjustified beliefs of others. I hope to show that the very ideal of religious tolerance—born of the notion that every human being should be free to believe whatever he wants about God—is one of the principal forces driving us towards the abyss.⁴¹

Not only is this approach incredibly alienating for both religious people and a lot of non-religious ones, making these authors seem cold, mean, callous, self-important, borderline authoritarian, and overall highly unpleasant, but it also does nothing to develop their arguments and further their cause. While I am all for attacking religion for its excesses and

³⁹ “Psalm 78:44,” *Holy Bible* (China: Collins, 1991): 575.

⁴⁰ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* (London: Penguin Books, 2007): 291.

⁴¹ Harris, 14-15.

mistakes, I see no reason – to paraphrase Daniel Dennett – in attacking the Grannies of the world.

Furthermore, while I do not believe that it is my place here to build up a counterargument against this pugilistic aspect of the New Atheist movement, since people like Alister McGrath have already been doing that for quite some time, I would still like to point out one thing. Following what Reza Aslan wrote in *Beyond Fundamentalism* – “It is easy to blame religion for acts of violence carried out in religion’s name, easier still to comb through scripture for bits of savagery and assume a simple causality between the text and the deed. But no religion is inherently violent or peaceful; people are violent or peaceful.”⁴² – I would like to suggest that the common link which binds all of the terrible deeds listed above is not religion, or at least nor religion alone. I would like to suggest that it is also power, both social and political, as well as the human desire to obtain it at all costs and by all means necessary.

Every ideology can be used in the service of power and oppression, be that ideology secular or religious; and religion has always been a perfect ideology to be used as a means to justify whatever was socially or politically necessary at the time. Let us exemplify this use of religion for two highly contrasting purposes on the American institution of slavery.

4.3 Religion as an Empty Vessel

The Bible may, indeed does, contain a warrant for trafficking in humans, for ethnic cleansing, for slavery, for bride-price, and for indiscriminate massacre.

Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*

The American institution of slavery has been used by the New Atheists on many an occasion. They bring it up every time they try to prove a point about the reactionary nature of religion and its detrimental effect on the development of human kind. Richard Dawkins writes in *The God Delusion* that slavery “was taken for granted in the Bible and throughout most of history,”⁴³ in order to prove that while human mores have changed over time due to secular developments, religion – at least in part responsible for slavery – is dragging us down and hindering our progress. And Christopher Hitchens boils down his “study of religion” to a

⁴² Reza Aslan, *Beyond Fundamentalism* (New York: Random House, 2009): 4.

⁴³ Dawkins, 300.

well-researched albeit misguided and painfully detailed examination of “its revoltingly crude racism”:

Christian preachers of all kinds had justified slavery until the American Civil War and even afterwards, on the supposed biblical warrant that of the three sons of Noah (Shem, Ham, and Japhet), Ham had been cursed and cast into servitude. But Joseph Smith took this nasty fable even further, fulminating in his “Book of Abraham” that the swarthy races of Egypt had inherited this very curse. Also, at the made-up battle of “Cumora”, a site located conveniently near his own birthplace, the “Nephites”—described as fair-skinned and “handsome”—contended against the “Lamanites”, whose descendants were punished with dark pigment for turning away from god.⁴⁴

While this passage could do without a lot of unnecessary names and facts stuffed in it by a gleeful journalist who had obviously just learned a couple of new words, Hitchens does raise a good point: Given the fact that Christianity was at the time essentially used against them, how come that the African slaves converted in America to this religion in such vast numbers? Furthermore how come that they remained Christian even after slavery was abolished in the U.S.?

Before we properly move to the topic of Christianization of African slaves in America, it might be helpful to map the initial religious background of this diverse group of people in order to establish a starting point of said Christianizing efforts. Upon their arrival and perhaps in a couple of subsequent decades the vast majority of slaves were discernibly not Christian. Charles Joyner states that as many as twenty percent of the enslaved Africans in America are estimated to have been Muslims.⁴⁵ Susel Perez adds to this point that in the lower Gulf area in particular, there was a minority of slaves who adhered to voodoo, and that all over the country there were quite a lot of them who had no religion at all.⁴⁶ By far the largest number of African slaves, though, held on to the pagan practices and beliefs they brought along with them from their homeland. Due to the diversity of the original tribes there are numerous definitions attempting to be all-inclusive, one of which postulates that these traditional African religions have to do with the observance of rules of conduct in the way the individual

⁴⁴ Hitchens, 166-167.

⁴⁵ Charles Joyner, “Believer I Know: The Emergence of African American Christianity,” *Religion and American Culture*, David G. Hackett, ed. (New York: Taylor & Francis Books, 2003): 182.

⁴⁶ Susel Perez, “Slave Religion,” *Antebellum Slavery: Plantation Slave Life* 3 October 2011, 16 November 2016 <http://cghs.dadeschools.net/slavery/antebellum_slavery/plantation_slave_life/diet_religion/religion.htm>

goes about their daily life, the practice of rituals, and the recognition of the ever-presence of the living dead (ancestors) to allow the person to coexist in harmony with other members of the community and nature.⁴⁷

There is one key aspect of African religions this definition does not mention which is that these religious traditions were almost exclusively non-literary ones.⁴⁸ This proved to be a serious obstacle for the later American missionaries and pastors who, apart from narrowing the scope of their belief systems by focusing solely on Jesus Christ, had to introduce the slaves to the very concept of a holy book.

Although, even mentioning missionaries we are jumping ahead because in the early stages slave owners were actively preventing their slaves from becoming Christians. Behind these actions was the fear that since English law forbade the enslavement of Christians, they would have to emancipate their slaves once they got themselves baptized; fear that Christianity would spoil their slaves, make them think too highly of themselves, make them lazy and impudent, perhaps even rebellious; and finally also their fear that Christianizing their slaves would make them seem less foreign and thus more human in their eyes.⁴⁹

Their first fear was swiftly allayed by “colonial legislation declaring that baptism did not alter slave status.”⁵⁰ Their second fear was dispelled by several key passages taken from the Bible which, as it was explained to them by missionaries and ministers, would be repeated to the slaves over and over again, internalizing the message of obedience. Some of the passages in question were Ephesians 6:5 (“Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, in fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ”⁵¹) and Colossians 3:22-23 (“Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eye-service, as menpleasers; but with singleness of heart, fearing God: And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily as to the Lord, and not unto men”⁵²). Finally, their third fear proved to be rather insignificant as racism had such dehumanizing effects in regard to slaves that even their potential Christian faith did not change anything about their status.

⁴⁷ Amanda M. Rudolph, “Images of African Traditional Religions and Christianity in ‘Joe Turner’s Come and Gone’ and ‘The Piano Lesson,’” *Journal of Black Studies* 33.5 (2003): 563.

⁴⁸ „Why Did African Slaves Adopt the Bible?“ *NPR* 17 November 2016, 17 November 2016
<<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6997059>>

⁴⁹ Albert J. Raboteau, “African Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel,” *Religion and American Culture*, David G. Hackett, ed. (New York: Taylor & Francis Books, 2003): 75-6.

⁵⁰ Raboteau, 75.

⁵¹ *Holy Bible* (China: Collins, 1991): 1076.

⁵² *Holy Bible*, 1083

Here we can clearly see that the reasoning behind and the justification of the institution of slavery had more to do with economics as well as plain racism rather than (just) religion – which is how the New Atheists like to present this argument. In a way, Christianity was simply a means to a very particular end, a readily available excuse to justify one’s inhuman actions, and a handy vindication of enslaving and killing other people and making a lot of money off their work. Some might argue that the fault of religion lies simply in the fact that it gave the opportunity to awful people to act on their awful impulses, and that it provided them with the means and validation to control others and hurt them, but this line of reasoning begs an interesting question: Can as broad and malleable ideology as religion be held responsible for the way every single person who adheres to it chooses to interpret it and use it?

In this respect, I sometimes like to draw a parallel between the religious institution and the institution of marriage. Both are very broad, both have a long history, both have a lot of members and proponents, both induce a lot of emotions in people, and both have a lot of good attributes as well as a lot of bad ones. In case of marriage, we could certainly take an example by the New Atheist and point out that it has historically been linked to such awful phenomena as child brides, stoning for pre-marital sex, honor killings, forced female submissiveness, or that even in today’s First World countries it is bogged down by high divorce rates and numerous cases of domestic abuse, sexual abuse, mail-order brides or a plethora of alimony scandals. But what would we think of a person who would try to argue that because of this list of negatives connected to marriage the whole institution should be abolished? A person who would yell and shout about the detrimental effect marriage has had on the welfare of human kind? A person who would refuse to admit that marriage has also brought a lot of good into people’s lives and into the world? Would we listen to them? Would we buy their book? Would we feel compelled to debate them? Or would we just not invite them to our wedding?

To go back to the issue of slavery, though, once the plantation owners realized that there was no problem – economic or other – in allowing their slaves to be converted to Christianity, they started to let missionaries do their work. The problem was that not every slave was open to the idea of being converted to this religion. Some slaves, particularly those from South Carolina and Georgia where they were working on isolated rice plantations, did not accept Jesus as their Savior for the simple reason that they did not get enough exposure to the whites and their religion; others outright rejected it because of “the Fondness they have for their own

Heathenish Rites”, as a missionary quoted in Albert J. Raboteau’s essay entitled “African Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel” claims.⁵³

Truth of the matter is that a significant number of slaves eventually accepted Christianity. The two major waves of conversions which took place roughly during the 1740’s and at the turn of the eighteenth and the nineteenth century are nowadays termed the Great Awakening and the Second Great Awakening.⁵⁴ The slaves converted in spite of the fact that at least some of them must have been aware of the devious ways in which religion was used against them. Raboteau partially illuminates this point when he writes that they often did so only because they were hoping that being baptized would elevate their social status and eventually ensure freedom for their children, if not for themselves.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, in spite of the slaves’ hopes and the ministers’ dutiful work there was another major reason for such widespread wave of slave conversion that made it possible for men of God to convince slaves to join their faith. As Amanda M. Rudolph indicates, “the slaves embraced part of Christianity because of the telling of the exodus story”.⁵⁶ To be more precise, they embraced it because of the reinterpretation thereof. The exodus story was, of course, not a novel concept in the American cultural history as the Pilgrim Fathers and other early colonists famously thought of their journey across the Atlantic Ocean in terms of the biblical story of the Israelites fleeing from the Egyptian pharaoh across the desert to find their new homeland. Nonetheless, Albert J. Raboteau explains the slaves’ later understanding of this paradigm: “For black Christians, the imagery was reversed: the Middle Passage had brought them to Egypt land, where they suffered bondage under a new Pharaoh. White Christians saw themselves as the New Israel; slaves identified themselves as the old.”⁵⁷

In a way, Christianity became the light at the end of a very dark tunnel for the slaves as it allowed them to believe in an omnipotent God who was watching over them, seeing the suffering their masters brought down on them and judging them for it, and who would sooner or later help them. As Susel Perez writes, “slaves believed that if God had sided against religious and political powers in the Bible, then he could also help them become free. They

⁵³ Raboteau, 78.

⁵⁴ Perez.

⁵⁵ Raboteau, 77.

⁵⁶ Rudolph, 564.

⁵⁷ Raboteau, 81.

believed that Jesus was powerful enough to do anything”.⁵⁸ In a way, “Christianity became part of accepting America as [their new] home.”⁵⁹

The basic contradiction in the approach towards the Christianity of the slaves and the Christianity of their masters rests in the fact that, “the slaves knew that no matter how sincerely religious the slave owners might be, their Christianity was compatible with slavery, and the slaves’ was not”.⁶⁰ This division line ran deep. It is astonishing that the same book provided enough material for one group of people to interpret it as condoning slavery, and for another to find evidence in it that condemned the first group for their stance on the issue. Yet this is what happened. Maria Stewart, a free black reform activist from Boston wrote in 1831 the following:

America, America, foul and indelible is thy stain! Dark and dismal is the cloud that hangs over thee, for thy cruel wrongs and injuries to the fallen sons of Africa. The blood of her murdered ones cries to heaven for vengeance against Thee. You may kill, tyrannize, and oppress as much as you choose, until cry shall come up before the throne of God.⁶¹

Allusions to this unbridgeable gap can be found in other works of many a writer and intellectual of the time. To give one well-known example, Thomas Jefferson, ruminating on the ways in which slavery corrupted the masters and exploited the slaves wrote, “Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just.”⁶² We could also mention the name of Frederick Douglass who in the appendix to his autobiography *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* directly tackled the dual nature of Christianity in the country at the time, distinguishing between the “Christianity of this land” and “the Christianity of Christ”:

To be the friend of the one is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical

⁵⁸ Perez.

⁵⁹ David Blight, “Religion and Slavery,” *Africans in America* 6 August 2013, 6 August 2013 <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2narr2.html>>

⁶⁰ Raboteau, 81.

⁶¹ Raboteau, 83.

⁶² Quoted in Hitchens, 177.

Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity.⁶³

In this sense, Frederick Douglass' comments are a great example of how religion can be one thing for one group of people and at the same time something entirely different for another group of people; how it can give them hope and meaning to their lives but also be used to abuse them; how it can help one person while simultaneously hurting another. In other words, Frederick Douglass put in words the same thought Reza Aslan expressed in his 2015 *The Daily Show* interview in which he said, "In this country, not two hundred years ago, both slave owners and abolitionists not only used the same Bible to justify their viewpoints, they used the same verses to do so. That's the thing about scripture. Its power comes from its malleability. You can read it in any way you want to."⁶⁴

Religion can be anything to anyone and when it comes to all the terrible things the New Atheists love to put into their neat little well-researched lists, I would argue that more often than not it has been used merely as a means to an end. As such I would be hesitant to fault the ideology itself, but rather the people who have historically been abusing it.

4.4 The Effect of Hatred Squared

These No-goodnik no-Godniks are growing in numbers and power in America. It makes me wonder how a God could exist who'd allow people to piss me off so much. Luckily, a recent survey published in the American Sociological Review revealed that atheists are the least trusted group in America—less trusted, even, than homosexuals. It makes sense—at least we trust the homosexuals with our hair.

— Stephen Colbert, *I Am America*

So far we have discussed the historical background of the New Atheism, talked about the basic tenets of the movement, and debated whether or not their arguments are valid. The question left to be asked is: Has the New Atheist movement had any effect? Have these people achieved their goals? If the main purpose of the New Atheists was simply to raise awareness of world religions' dark side, they have certainly succeeded. They have also

⁶³ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2009): 115-6.

⁶⁴ "The Daily Show – Reza Aslan," 4:01.

managed to get atheism as such into general consciousness. But when it comes to convincing people that religion is a wrong choice for them, or that atheism would be a much better option, I am more than doubtful. In other words, when it comes to bringing the masses under the fold of non-belief, I would argue that they have achieved the exact opposite of what they were hoping for.

When Will Martin Gervais writes, “There are strong theoretical reasons to expect believers to distrust atheists,”⁶⁵ his words are supported not only by all the writers we will mention momentarily but also by Gallup Poll numbers. According to these, only 45% of people would vote for an atheist, while 53% would decidedly not.⁶⁶ I would suggest that the reason for this lies in the argument about morality we have discussed in Chapter 3; the argument according to which religion is connected to morality, so any person who ostensibly does not have one is perceived as immoral. We could perhaps rephrase this a bit simplistically as the if-you-do-not-believe-in-the-Ten-Commandments-then-how-do-you-know-not-to-steal-and-kill-people paradigm which, as erroneous and far off as it may be, seems to be quite widespread. Or we could quote Dan Savage who was a guest on *The Real Time with Bill Maher* in 2008 and described it in the following way, “You can believe whatever you want, you can pick up religions and discard them and put on new ones, but Americans only seem only to be able to support somebody who has some religion, any religion, because we infer something good about their character, as if having a religion makes them a better person.”⁶⁷

Apart from the morality issue, other writers and observers have attempted to find additional reasons for the animosity towards and general mistrust of atheism and of atheists in the U.S. and elsewhere. Paul Cliteur, for example, writes in “The Definition of Atheism”, “It is difficult to understand how atheism can ignite so much hatred in other people. Recent rebuttals of atheism usually try to load atheism with colossal pretensions.”⁶⁸ Pretensions are only a small part of the problem, though, so Cliteur soon elaborates on his explanation:

It seems that the nature of the rejection of atheism has changed, but there is still, so it seems, a universal condemnation. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century,

⁶⁵ Will Martin Gervais, *Master's Thesis: Do You Believe in Atheists? Trust and Anti-Atheist Prejudice* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2008): 33.

⁶⁶ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Some Americans Reluctant to Vote for Mormon, 72-Year-Old Presidential Candidates,” *Gallup* 18 November 2016, 18 November 2016 <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/26611/some-americans-reluctant-vote-mormon-72yearold-presidential-candidates.aspx?version=print>>

⁶⁷ “Real Time with Bill Maher, Episode 122, 29/02/2008,” *HBO*, 44:50. Accessed via <<http://www.hbo.com/real-time-with-bill-maher/episodes/0/122-episode/index.html>>

⁶⁸ Paul Cliteur, “The Definition of Atheism,” *Journal of Religion and Society* 11 (2009): 6.

the atheist was being criticized because his worldview would undermine sound morals and deprive life of meaning. Contemporary complaints are that atheists show no respect for the religion of others or do not want to enter into dialogue with believers. Other complaints that are widely voiced are that atheists are polarizing society or just as dogmatic as religious fundamentalists.⁶⁹

“Dogmatic”, “polarizing” – we could also add “militant”. “Militant” is the one word which is used constantly about the New Atheists and it might as well be the reason why so many Americans would hesitate to call themselves atheists if you were to ask them. I would suggest that it is in no small part because of the mean-spiritedness of the New Atheists, who have in the past few years lent their faces to the atheist movement as a whole, that a lot of Americans today associate atheism with unfriendliness, impoliteness and disrespect, and want to have nothing to do with it. Cliteur expounds on this idea when he writes, “In popular parlance, atheism is associated with all kinds of negative ideas and attitudes, especially with the way it can be defended. Atheists have a reputation for being arrogant, militant, missionary, zealous, and also impolite if not rude.”⁷⁰

The most interesting part of this issue is that the New Atheists seem to be very well aware of what they are doing as well as of the effects of their incendiary rhetoric and provocative statements. For instance, Sam Harris writes in his book, “I think our criticism is actually more barbed in the sense that we are offending people but we are also telling them that they're wrong to be offended.”⁷¹ While I do agree with Harris that just because somebody is offended it does not automatically mean that they are right or that they have the moral upper hand, I also have to point out the very strange and unfortunate way he goes about dispersing this offence. Let us exemplify this by quoting his response to a part of an article published by Sir Patrick Bateson on the Edge Web site. In the article Bateson wrote:

It seems staggeringly insensitive to tell [believers] that they are fooling themselves and that, since they only have one life, they should get out there [and] enjoy it. No amount of science is going to help them to perceive the world in a way that is helpful to them. Science can be applied to relieving the conditions that

⁶⁹ “Definition of Atheism,” 7.

⁷⁰ “Definition of Atheism,” 15.

⁷¹ “The Four Horsemen,” *Top Documentary Films* 18 November 2016, 18 November 2016
<<http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/four-horsemen/>>

oppress them—but that is a different matter. Telling them to be rational will only compound their misery.⁷²

The way Sam Harris responded to it is rather indicative of the whole New Atheist movement. He is insulting; he is mocking; he is reaching into the barrel of human awfulness and scraping its bottom to show a random, gruesome example of something somebody is doing somewhere in the name of religion; and he is not offering any alternatives whatsoever. In his response, Harris writes in a somewhat sarcastic manner:

Patrick Bateson tells us that it is “staggeringly insensitive” to undermine the religious beliefs of people who find these beliefs consoling. I agree completely. For instance: it is now becoming a common practice in Afghanistan and Pakistan to blind and disfigure little girls with acid for the crime of going to school. When I was a neo-fundamentalist rational neo-atheist I used to criticize such behavior as an especially shameful sign of religious stupidity. I now realize—belatedly and to my great chagrin—that I knew nothing of the pain that a pious Muslim man might feel at the sight of young women learning to read. Who am I to criticize the public expression of his faith? Bateson is right. Clearly a belief in the inerrancy of the holy Qur’an is indispensable for these beleaguered people.⁷³

The New Atheists have through their nastiness and their inflammatory rhetoric enraged millions of people. They have brought attention to themselves and the many books they were flogging in the press at the time, but by being so mean-spirited and purposely shocking they have only repelled people instead of bringing them in. While they may have convinced some people to abandon their religious beliefs, it is more likely that after all of their fear-mongering and hate-spewing the believers still believe, the atheists still do not, and anyone who was undecided would rather opt out of talking about this topic because the very word “atheist” has due to their loathing and detestation of all things religious become toxic. Richard Dawkins may wonder why, “There are many people who know, in their heart of hearts, that they are atheists, but do not admit it to their families or even, in some cases, to themselves,”⁷⁴ but when he attempts to answer this question by writing that, “Partly, this is because the very word ‘atheist’ has been assiduously built up as a terrible and frightening label,”⁷⁵ one has to

⁷² Stenger, 78.

⁷³ Quoted in Stenger, 78-79.

⁷⁴ Dawkins, 26.

⁷⁵ Gervais, 35.

wonder if he even realizes that he was a member of the elite group of people who built that label up.

The question remains of what the next step might be? If the New Atheists managed to muddy the very name of atheism, what are the American atheists to do? There are two ways in which this question might be answered. One is not to ascribe these writers so much cultural importance. Admittedly, Richard Dawkins in particular might get his heart broken that way, as it only took him one and a half pages in the preface to his book to use the word “bestsellerdom”⁷⁶ to describe it, and he even let his publisher boast about the book selling over two million copies worldwide, but such is the burden he would have to bear. To compare, the 2011 BDSM hit *Fifty Shades of Grey* managed to sell over 125 million copies by June 2015 and not even that literary behemoth has brought about any tangible changes in the culture, which seems to suggest that selling a lot of copies of a book does not equal cultural importance or social influence. In other words, while the New Atheists have all together certainly ruffled up a lot of feathers in their heydays, now they seem to have run out of steam, and it is debatable whether they have left any lasting impression; especially if we take into account that most features which seem to characterize their whole movement have been present in the culture long before they even thought of bursting onto the scene. It is doubtful that they have changed the course of history. What they may have done is they have accelerated or perhaps slowed down a series of development which had already been set into motion. They saw a chance and took it, made their money, and now they are largely gone.

The other way has to do simply with getting rid of the “atheist” label. Judging even just by the case of Rebecca Vitsmun, the lady on the CNN news, atheism is certainly a defensible and unobjectionable position to take. Nevertheless the odds are very much stacked against it because the very word “atheist” leaves a bitter taste in people’s mouths – so changing the word might help. It has certainly been proposed on numerous occasions. British philosopher A. C. Grayling, for instance, while subscribing to a “non-religious outlook” believes that, “As is happens, no atheist should call himself or herself one. The term already sells a pass to theists, because it invites debate on their ground. A more appropriate term is ‘naturalist’, denoting one who takes it that the universe is a natural realm, governed by nature’s laws.”⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Dawkins, 14.

⁷⁷ Quoted in “Definition of Atheism,” 16.

Or perhaps we could take advice from another clever man from across the pond, English Renaissance man Stephen Fry, who in his hour-long interview on *The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson* stated:

There is a passive-aggressive victim status that religious people now have, which is to go, “Oh, these fundamentalist atheists...” Well, I am not a fundamentalist atheist. Being an atheist doesn’t mean anything to me. I don’t want anyone else to be an atheist. I have no interest in spreading atheism. If there was a word for someone that doesn’t believe in the tooth fairy, a flimpist, then I would have to say I am a flimpist. But being a flimpist is meaningless. It just means I don’t believe in the tooth fairy. It doesn’t involve a set of values. My values come from humanism, from the Enlightenment, the values of Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and people who thought for themselves and didn’t take any text for gospel.⁷⁸

Or perhaps the word “spiritual”, which a lot of Americans (particularly those living in the coastal areas) seem to be using a lot nowadays to describe their religious beliefs, is already becoming the preferred equivalent of atheism – or at least the first step away from their original religious denominations. Or perhaps finding a new label for “atheism” might not even be necessary because atheism will soon become so ubiquitous that its name will either lose its negative connotations or it will not need a name at all (here I am referring back to all those Czechs who do not even bother filling out the religion part of the decenary surveys). ~~Only~~ ~~God~~ Nobody knows what the future holds. Nevertheless, judging by the development in several countries in Europe – some in Western Europe, others in Northern Europe, and one in its very center – we can perhaps wager an educated guess.

⁷⁸ Stephen Fry, “The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson, 05/22/2013, 21:34” *Youtube* 19 November 2016, 19 November 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-uGMJmboOk>>

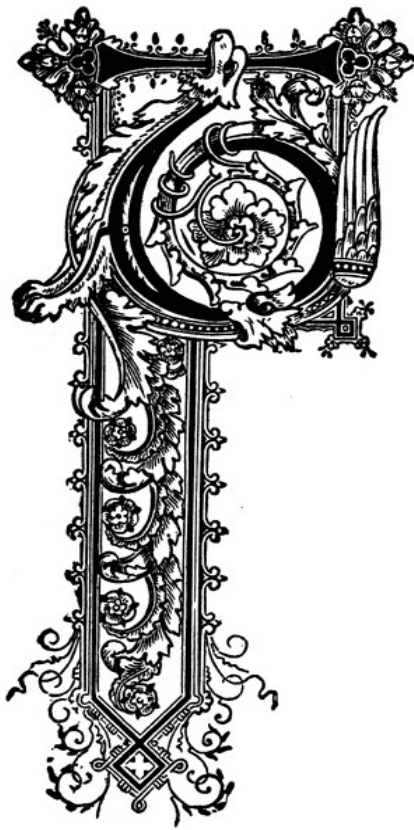
Be ye not afraid.

— Deuteronomy 1:29

The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you all. Amen.

— Revelation 22:21

Chapter 5 Conclusion



he short and arguably unimportant New Atheist excursion aside, what does the future hold for the atheist movement in the U.S.? In the first two chapters we have established that the number of people who no longer subscribe to any religion or faith is on the rise. Currently nearly one in every four Americans does not believe in God and given the trends, whose roots we have traced in the third chapter, that number will only get higher. Even if the noxiousness of the New Atheists analyzed in the fourth chapter sets this movement back a little bit, the overall development cannot be stopped. America is slowly but surely turning away from the Christian God, or from any other Gods or gods for that matter, and is embracing – for lack of a better, more palatable word – secularism.

There are those who try to deny this development.

Reza Aslan, for instance, argues in his book *Beyond Fundamentalism* that secular nationalism is giving way across the globe to new forms of nationalism based on ethnicity and, above all, religion:

In an increasingly globalized world, where the old demarcations of nation-states are slowly starting to give way, religion can no longer be viewed as simply a set of myths and rituals to be experienced in private. Religion is identity. Indeed, in

many parts of the world religion is fast becoming the supreme identity, encompassing and even superseding ethnicity, culture, and nationality.¹

I suppose that this whole issue all boils down to our definition of religion. After all, according to Aslan's definition even Czechs could be considered a deeply religious country simply because Christianity has a long history here, there are still some traditions – however secularized – that we adhere to, and the words, “This is a Christian country,” have for one reason or another even been recently written and shouted by many a Czech. Here lies the problem, though: If your definition of religion is so broad that it covers even the most irreligious nation in the world, it is a bad definition.

David Chidester offers an alternative view in his piece entitled “Baseball, Coca-Cola, and Rock'n'Roll”. In an attempt to define what “religion” means he quotes the French sociologist and philosopher David Émile Durkheim who stipulated in 1912 that, “Religion was constituted by beliefs and practices that revolve around sacred focus, a sacred focus that serves to unify a community.”² Does that mean that should the trend in America continue of increasing secularization and ever growing numbers of atheists, it would bring discord to the American community? Does it mean that atheism could have a corruptive effect on the very fabric of American society, disintegrating bonds between people and depriving them of their sense of community? Will Martin Gervais would certainly think so because in his essay “Do You Believe in Atheists?” he presented a very bleak picture of a world without religion:

Religion can be a very (and perhaps uniquely) powerful force for creating group solidarity and reinforcing group boundaries. Those without religion might be less able to form large groups, leading atheists to go about their lives without convening in any organized fashion (at least with other atheists). They may be members of political parties or sports fan clubs without feeling the need to form a group based on their shared skepticism about supernatural agency. Religion may be a powerful source for group identification and the lack of religion may not be a powerful source at all.³

¹ Reza Aslan, *Beyond Fundamentalism* (New York: Random House, 2009): 11.

² David Chidester, “Baseball, Coca-Cola, and Rock'n'Roll,” *Religion and American Culture*, David G. Hackett, ed. (New York: Taylor & Francis Books, 2003): 478.

³ Will Martin Gervais, *Master's Thesis: Do You Believe in Atheists? Trust and Anti-Atheist Prejudice* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2008): 32.

In reality, the situation will most definitely not be as catastrophic as Gervais is describing it. As of now, the state of (ir)religion in America has been very well described by Ross Douthat in *Bad Religion* when he wrote, “America has indeed become less traditionally Christian across the half century, just as religious conservatives insist, with unhappy consequences for our national life. But certain kinds of religious faith are as influential as ever, just as secular critics and the new atheists contend.”⁴ And as for future developments it is more than likely that the situation will resemble the scenario described by Damien Amana in his essay “The Remediation of Religion in a Visual Culture”, “Sociological projections on the trajectory of religion in modern society have assumed a dual albeit contrary stance: the *requiem* and the *resurrectio* [...] defined in the effacement of religion from the public space and the relegation of religion as a guide in the private fora.”⁵

By that I am definitely not alluding to the argument one hears a lot when discussing the state of irreligiousness in the U.S.; the argument that while people may not believe in an omnipotent, perfect, and personal God because such belief would conflict with the values they favor, they still consider themselves believers because they “believe” in freedom, dignity, human progress, and other ideals. This argument can be traced back for example to Robert Ingersoll, whom we mentioned in Chapter 3, who wrote:

I am an unbeliever, and I am a believer [...] I do not believe in the “Mosaic” account of creation, or in the flood, or the Tower of Babel, or that General Joshua turned back the sun or stopped the earth. [...] Neither do I believe that man is wholly depraved. I have not the least faith in the Eden, stake and apple story. Neither do I believe that God is an eternal jailer; that he is going to be the warden of an everlasting penitentiary in which the most of men are to be eternally tormented. I do not believe that any man can be justly punished or rewarded on account of his belief.

But I do believe in the nobility of human nature; I believe in love and home, and kindness and humanity; I believe in good fellowship and cheerfulness, in making wife and children happy. I believe in good nature, in giving to others all the rights that you claim for yourself. I believe in free thought, in reason, observation and experience. I believe in self-reliance and in expressing your honest thoughts. I

⁴ Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion* (New York: Free Press, 2012): 3.

⁵ Damien Amana, “The Remediation of Religion in a Visual Culture: Understanding the Interaction of Media, New Religious Experience and Globalization,” *Journal of Cultural and Media Studies* 2.2 (2014): 22.

have hope for the whole human race. What will happen to one, will, I hope, happen to all, and that, I hope, will be good. Above all, I believe in Liberty.⁶

I refuse this argument because believing in freedom or liberty or self-reliance has nothing to do with faith or religion. Just because someone thinks they believe in reason or observation it does not make them any less of an atheist – even if they do not like the contemporary sound of that word.

At the same time, though, I am aware of the fact that not everybody who says that they do not believe in the Christian God or in any other monotheistic deity is necessarily an atheist, which is a statement that, to a certain degree, is in direct contradiction to what this thesis has been about so far. As an example, knowing full well how ridiculous it will sound, I would like to point to Elizabeth Gilbert's novel *Eat, Pray, Love*, whose basic religious tenets have been described by Ross Douthat in *Bad Religion* in the following manner:

All religious traditions offer equally valid paths to the divine; all religious teachings are just “transporting metaphors” designed to bridge the gulf between the finite and the infinite; most religious institutions claim a monopoly on divinity that they don't really enjoy. To the plight of so many contemporary Americans, awash in spiritual choices but skeptical of every particular religious option, eager to worship and pray but uncertain where and how and to whom to do it, Gilbert offers a reassuring endorsement of do-it-yourself religion.⁷

“Do-it-yourself religion” sounds like the kind of neat concept of personalized faith which would not only make people answer “No” to the question, “Are you a member of any church?” or, “Do you believe in God?” but also function as a midpoint between theism and atheism. The concept itself may also remind us of the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville:

When the conditions of society are becoming more equal, and each individual man becomes more like all the rest, more weak and more insignificant, a habit grows up of ceasing to notice the citizens to consider only the people, and of overlooking individuals to think only of their kind. At such times the human mind seeks to embrace a multitude of different objects at once; and it constantly strives to succeed in connecting a variety of consequences with a single cause. The idea

⁶ Robert G. Ingersoll, *The Writings of Robert G. Ingersoll* (New York: The Dresden Publishing, 1902): epub copy with no page numbers.

⁷ Douthat, 214.

of unity so possesses itself of man, and is sought for by him so universally, that if he thinks he has found it, he readily yields himself up to repose in that belief. Nor does he content himself with the discovery that nothing is in the world but a creation and a Creator; still embarrassed by this primary division of things, he seeks to expand and to simplify his conception by including God and the universe in one great whole.⁸

This not only creates an environment of mystical pantheism in which, “God is an experience rather than a person,”⁹ but more importantly it is also highly reminiscent of the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson on the topic of religion. As Harold Bloom rightfully points out in his essay “Emerson: The American Religion”, “The mind of Emerson is the mind of America, for worse and for glory, and the central concern of that mind was the American religion, which most memorably was named ‘self-reliance’. [And] I begin by noting that it is *self*-reliance as opposed to God-reliance.”¹⁰ It seems that within the scope of American culture people have always looked for some sort of higher power, a validating force which would provide them with reassurance in their uncertain lives. For a long time this reassurance was offered predominantly by the Christian church but nowadays its hold on it seems less exclusive. That does not mean, however, that people at large – and particularly in the US – do not desire to believe in something greater, be it Nature, Humanity, the Universe, or anything else.

As far as Emerson’s view of the religiousness in American culture is concerned, though, it must be said that God and individual identity are tied very closely together, and that the relationship with the first one can simply be so personal that no organized church has oftentimes been needed to facilitate it. As Emerson wrote, there is a “spark of that [divine] light,”¹¹ in each and every person, indirectly implying that organized church has become rather superfluous in mediating between (American) people and the aforementioned validating force they crave. And this took place already in the latter half of the nineteenth century. With regard to the contemporary state of affairs, I would like to suggest that while the personalized religious practice Emerson discussed in his writings still comes into play in the American culture, new secular influences have begun to accompany it, helping it not only weaken the power of organized religion, but of religion itself as well.

⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, accessed via < <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/816/816.txt> >

⁹ Douthat, 223.

¹⁰ Harold Bloom, “Emerson: The American Religion,” *Emerson’s Essays* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2006): 95.

¹¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History,” *Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Hazelton: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001): 21.

If we consider Emerson's take on self-reliant, personalized religion the first step away from the church, then perhaps the current upsurge of people claiming not only that they are not associated with any church but that they consider themselves proper atheists is the second step towards American irreligiousness. This almost makes one wonder what would happen to the American culture should it be true, and if it would be such a terrible thing should it really happen. George Levine, for instance, offers a positive view of such future of America in the introductory chapter to *The Joy of Secularism* when he writes that, "A secular world is not only worth it—that life is indeed worth living—but with all the inevitable pains and losses it can be wonderful, indeed, at times joyous, and a sense of that wonder enhances the possibilities of improving it."¹²

It is impossible to image a godless America now, but in ten, twenty, or thirty years – if the statistical data and all the projections are right – a lot of things are about to change. However, while David Chidester writes in "Baseball, Coca-Cola, and Rock'n'Roll" that religion ensures, "a sense of continuity in the midst of a constantly changing America through the forces of tradition, heritage, and collective memory,"¹³ it is highly doubtful that the U.S. is going to lose any of that just because Americans, on the whole, are definitely going to stop blindly trusting the church, probably going to stop believing in the traditional conception of the Christian God, and perhaps even move away from religion altogether.

While traditions change, heritage remains the same throughout the ages, and as for collective memory – some memories fade away and are destined to be forgotten while new ones are constantly being made. Other countries have moved away from Christianity, became largely secularized – the Czech Republic, Great Britain or the handful of Nordic states being just the tip of the iceberg –, and still remained true to their traditions and heritage. Their secularization has not brought about their doom, and it will not happen in case of America either. And if anyone is still in doubt, they can look across the Big Pond, reach for a book of poetry by Philip Larkin, and rest assured that even if God goes away everything is going to be alright:

When churches will fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show,

¹² George Levine, "Introduction," *The Joy of Secularism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011): 1.

¹³ Chidester, 468.

Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

[...] Power of some sort will go on
In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;
But superstition, like belief, must die,
And what remains when disbelief has gone?
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

A shape less recognisable each week,
A purpose more obscure. [...]
For though I've no idea
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.¹⁴

¹⁴ Philip Larkin, "Church Going," *Art of Europe* 20 November 2016, 20 November 2016
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Appendixes

Appendix 1

Questionnaire: Ryan, New York resident, age 23

If you were raised Christian I was wondering what made you turn away from the Christian faith? Did you just grow out of it or did you start to disagree with some of the tenets of the Church? And if you already grew up in an Atheist family, how did you perceive being different in this way from other kids? For example, what did you make of you not going to church when everybody else was?

I wasn't explicitly raised in a particularly atheist or particularly Christian household. My dad is or was more or less a believer, and my mom was a nonbeliever but didn't involve herself very heavily on one side or the other. I only became "actively" involved with my atheist beliefs around 19 or 20 when I conceptualized the extent to which people actually believed all of this nonsense. In short, the burden of proof is on the shoulders of the person making the claim, that is to say, the Christian or theist is responsible for proving that god is real; the atheist or agnostic is not responsible for proving that god is not real. One must suspend the acceptance of belief until there is evidence that can justify the belief, and the more extreme the belief, the more extreme the evidence must be. If the claim is something that is incidental both in realism and in impact, then minimal evidence is required. If I say I own a cat, you can say "well, I know that cats are real, I know that people own cats, there is little reason to assume that he is wrong or lying, and my worldview would not be altered if I was wrong in accepting this belief, therefore the belief is acceptable." Then again, if I said I had a pet dragon, you might say "well, before I can believe you have a pet dragon, you must prove that dragons are even real, and if they are real, can they be kept as pets," etc etc. That is a worldview-altering belief with many layers, each of which requires separate proof. To say "I believe in an invisible space-daddy who created the universe despite the fact that ALL of the available evidence points to a naturalistic explanation for the universe AND every god hypothesis ever put forth is either self-contradictory, immoral, or downright illogical (eg: anything at all to do with creation), I have literally no choice but to be an atheist."

I understand that being an Atheist in America may not be that easy nowadays, people questioning one's moral compass and feeling that Atheism threatens religion, one of the founding stones of American society. Would you say that Atheism really poses such a threat to religious faith? And how do you see the position of Atheists in the society yourself? Have you ever had any problem because of it?

Honestly I hope that atheism poses a threat to religion. There are only three major sources of evil in the world: sadism (the enjoyment derived from causing harm to others, either physical or mental); a sort of illogically selfish indifference in which people view others as mere means and will do what they want regardless of its impact on others (this is very different from the morally-commendable version of selfishness known as "rational self-interest" which is actually very health), and faith. Faith does NOT equal religion. Faith is simply any belief held for unsuitable reasons. Any belief that derives from the desire to believe, emotion, indoctrination, etc is not acceptable. In order to function well in the real world, one must hold as many true beliefs and as few false beliefs as possible. Therefore, it is imperative that one creates a system whereby he or she can consistently differentiate fact from fantasy. Faith is the way of the fool, and reason is the way of the enlightened. Religion is simply a symptom of the larger plague that is faith. There have been atheists who drown in faith. We have seen it with Stalin, Pol Pot, Kim Jong-il, etc. However, their atheism did not lead to their atrocities. It was still faith, just not religious faith; it was humanistic, statist faith. Yet still it is belief in something without sufficient evidence. The reason religion is such a hot target of atheists and other rationalists is because it is the most obviously fantastical. Bronze age morals? Desert myths? Human sacrifice? Homophobia? Sexism? Burnt offerings? Slavery (yes, the bible not only advocates slavery, but says that masters can beat their slaves so long as the slaves survive for a day or two after the lashing). Every Sunday, billions of people pray beneath a symbol of ancient torture and execution, then consume symbolic items of cannibalism. I refer of course to the crucifix, the host, and the wine (body/blood of Christ). It's so fucked up. And until we eradicate the obvious fairy tales, the more easily-disguised fairy tales will continue to thrive.

Regarding morality, let me make this clear: there is no such thing as religious morality. Religion only provides dogma. We know how the commandments go. “Thou shalt not this” and “thou shalt not that.” This isn’t a moral code; this is simply a list of rules without any actual explanation behind any of them. There is no fundamental principle guiding any of them. Let’s take an easy one: “Thou shalt not kill.” Seems easy enough, right? Except... what about self-defense? Or euthanasia? Or war? The list goes on. There is no code there, just a rule that seems okay except for the many instances in which following it would mean certain peril. If we had to have a “thou shalt not” style rule, how about “thou shalt not initiate force” or something? By using that word initiate, you have ruled out assault, rape, murder, while at the same time still allowing for self-defense, acts of justified war, and so forth.

The main problem I’ve had as an American atheist is the need to constantly hide my views, which is always a major major problem. Honestly, it is upsetting.

Part of my thesis will deal with the so-called New Atheism represented by people like Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, Bill Maher or Seth MacFarlane. These guys are quite vocal with their opinion that religion is not only absurd and a fake, but it is also detrimental to the well-being and development of the human kind, bringing with it only grief and bloodshed. Have you ever heard about any of these men? If so, what was the context? And do you agree with their opinions or do you consider them too radical? What is your position on this anti-religious rhetoric?

I have read and watched everybody you have mentioned, and I love them all. I don’t agree with all of them by any means. I’m what I like to call a “liberalitarian,” which I guess is basically the democrat version of a libertarian. I think that anti-religious rhetoric is important for a variety of reasons. First of all, religion is toxic. I’m not saying that religion has never done any good. Obviously, religion and religion people have done lots of good things. However, NOTHING good that religion has ever done can be accomplished only through religion. Morality? Even if religion does have morality (it doesn’t), it’s easy to find morality through philosophical, reasonable means. Charity? There are TONS of secular charities. Community? My community includes my rock-climbing buddies. Music? Art? Again, we don’t need religion for

that. However, religion or something equivalent to religion (eg: dogmatic statism or communism or something) is required to make bad people do good things. And even then, it's hard to imagine a statist crashing a hijacked plane into a building.

But even if you don't agree with the above people, they are still a force for good. Why? Because they force discussion. They force people to examine their own beliefs. Richard Dawkins was once a believer. So was Bill Maher. The host of The Atheist Experience, Matt Dillahunty, was a devout baptist studying to be a minister, and it was through his studies and his dedication to first Peter 3:16 that he inadvertently became an atheist.

What are your thoughts on some of the instances of religion having a say in things it probably should not have such as in the pro-choice debate, the gay-marriage debate, or the teaching-Creationism-in-schools debate? Should the Church be able to talk into things like this, talk into other people's business who may not share its views? Would you consider this mixing of religion and politics unconstitutional?

Creation is bullshit. This isn't even a religious debate. People get confused by the word "theory." Colloquially, theory means the same as hypothesis. In science, however, a theory is the graduation point of an idea. Forever set in stone only to be tweaked and modified with time. Or rather, a theory is a scientific model that explains a factual phenomenon. The reality is simple: evolution is a fact. That is just the truth. ALL of the evidence not only suggests this, it PROVES it. DNA alone is enough to prove evolution. Fossils alone are enough to prove evolution. Anatomy is enough to prove evolution. The list goes on. And yet we don't need the full list. Every major category that proves evolution is factual, and there are tons of separate categories all at work simultaneously. Evolution is a done deal. Moreover, many religious people (including the Vatican) is sold on evolution, and they still believe in God, which means that the discussion is irrelevant. There is zero evidence pointing to creation. Therefore, it should not EVER be taught.

The gay issue is going away. The old conservatives are dying out. The homophobes are losing their last bit of life. I don't even need to address the idiocy of their arguments.

Abortion is trickier, but again, I'm not sure why it got mixed in with religion. The whole thing is stupid. Even if you use the bible as a stone-clad source of moral and legal guidance, there is still some abortion wiggle-room if you act quickly enough (18 days in... read Leviticus, it has to do with blood running through the fetus's veins).

And finally, what do you think about the fact that the number of Atheists seems to be rising in America, particularly among teenagers and young adults? Why do you think it is mostly the younger generations? Would you say TV shows such as Family Guy have anything to do with it? And where you think this trend will lead? Can you imagine a godless America? Can you already see some changes in the society brought about by Atheism?

I hope that by the time my children are grown, most of the country is atheistic, and all but a few freak pockets of the world reject creation offhand as a fairy tale. The changes are both major and minor. Seth MacFarlane, Bill Maher, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Dan Dennet, Matt Dillahunty, The Atheist Experience, Bill Nye, George Carlin, Thomas fucking Jefferson, they all contributed to the level of logic now often seen throughout the country. Change is coming fast, though not fast enough. Indoctrination is still all-too real. Creationism is still a toxic plague. Homophobia runs rampant. The list goes on. But yes, change for the better is coming, and the fairy tales about flying spaghetti monsters are coming to a welcome close.

Appendix 2

Questionnaire: Nicole, New York resident, age 38

If you were raised Christian I was wondering what made you turn away from the Christian faith? Did you just grow out of it or did you start to disagree with some of the tenets of the Church? And if you already grew up in an Atheist family, how did you perceive being different in this way from other kids? For example, what did you make of you not going to church when everybody else was?

Technically I was raised Roman Catholic. My mother is first generation Italian American, and as such religion played a very big role in her childhood. My grandmother was very much a stereotypical Nonna, she cooked all of the time, and was always saying the Rosary. My father was raised generic Christian, but, to appease my grandfather, became a Catholic before marrying my mother.... then he became a “born again” Christian, and that’s where things got strange, and I believe started me on the path of rejecting religion as an adult.

I went to CCD every Sunday; most of the time my teachers were parents, sometimes they were unpleasant nuns. CCD was followed by Mass and then by a big Italian-style supper. Once my father became a born-again, he added Bible flash cards to the dinner routine...almost every night. We were told that our religion was the “right” religion, and that everyone else was wrong, or a sinner. My parents outsourced a lot of their parenting decisions to the bible...they took “what would Jesus do?” pretty literally. Whenever I had a question about a bible teaching I was told that I simply had to accept it “on faith.” Questioning things too deeply was strongly discouraged. I was threatened with ex-communication on several occasions for what were pretty innocuous childhood transgressions, and the big “sex” talk ended in “sex is a sin, unless your are married, and then it is only for procreation.” I lived in fear of burning in Hell for all eternity if I did anything that my parents, or the Church, felt was un-Christian. As a child, and especially as a teen, I struggled with trying to be a good “Christian girl” vs. a typical girl. I was also told repeatedly that I had all that I had because God wanted it to be so, which made me feel incredibly sad and guilty every time I saw a commercial for UNICEF, or heard about some horrible disaster that happened to someone else. Looking back, I feel that my religious upbringing was a form of emotional abuse, even though I know my parents did not intend for it to be that way.

Then I grew up, moved out, went to college, got a job and went into the world, making friends from other faiths, living life, and realizing that there is no such thing as “one true faith, one true religion.” The more experiences I had, the more I understood about the world around me, the less I believed in a single deity that sits up in the ether pulling strings; the more disgusted I became with how divisive religion can be. As a mother the last thing I want is for my children to experience the same guilt and fear that I did. There are enough scary things in this world that the last thing I want is for them to fear God.

I understand that being an Atheist in America may not be that easy nowadays, people questioning one's moral compass and feeling that Atheism threatens religion, one of the founding stones of American society. Would you say that Atheism really poses such a threat to religious faith? And how do you see the position of Atheists in the society yourself? Have you ever had any problem because of it?

We still celebrate Christmas and Easter, but as secular holidays. My husband was raised Jewish, and we celebrate many of those holidays as well. We both love the traditions, the sense of community, and the ideas of being ethical and good that religion teaches you, but we are teaching these concepts to our children in a more holistic, generic, non-deity centric, non-guilt, non-fear ridden way. They are being raised to understand what Christianity and Judaism are. We feel the understanding of those religions, along with Islam, and the role they play in the world is essential in relating to the people around you, but we are not raising them to believe that there is “one right” belief and that there is a God up in the heavens pulling strings. This has really upset my parents. I think this is due to their literal fear of God, and a grave sense of disappointment in themselves; where did they go wrong? How could they have raised such a disobedient, and faithless, daughter? Interestingly enough, my husband's family is totally accepting of our decision.

Several members of my family are Tea Party Republicans, and they absolutely see Atheism as leading cause for what's wrong in this country. Do I believe that Atheism is a threat to one's faith? No, not unless you are not secure in your faith, and are looking for a reason to walk away from it. But, like anyone else who is susceptible to change, you have to be open to it for it to happen. The only time I have ever had any problems with my beliefs is when my family has taken issue with it. I find that most, reasonable people are very accepting of my beliefs. That said, I'm not walking around advertising them either. I do not feel the need to publicly declare my views, or to proselytize to the masses. Instead, when asked, I tell people that I

believe that we (humans, animals, plants) are all connected, and that we are responsible for each other as well as the greater world around us. I tell my children that some people call that connection “God”, others call it “Mother Nature,” “Yahweh,” “the Force,” its name isn’t important as long as we respect it.

Part of my thesis will deal with the so-called New Atheism represented by people like Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, Bill Maher or Seth MacFarlane. These guys are quite vocal with their opinion that religion is not only absurd and a fake, but it is also detrimental to the well-being and development of the human kind, bringing with it only grief and bloodshed. Have you ever heard about any of these men? If so, what was the context? And do you agree with their opinions or do you consider them too radical? What is your position on this anti-religious rhetoric?

I am uncomfortable with any belief in the extreme, whether it is Christianity or Atheism. I am much more of a centrist. While I do agree with many of their beliefs, especially with how much grief and bloodshed religion has lead to, I also believe that it has done a lot of good too. I do not believe that religion in and of itself is detrimental to the well-being and development of the human kind, I believe that it is the power-hungry extremists, who are using it as a tool for power and greed, that are detrimental to the well-being and development of human kind. Those people should be locked in a mental institution and the key thrown away! ☺

What are your thoughts on some of the instances of religion having a say in things it probably should not have such as in the pro-choice debate, the gay-marriage debate, or the teaching-Creationism-in-schools debate? Should the Church be able to talk into things like this, talk into other people’s business who may not share its views? Would you consider this mixing of religion and politics unconstitutional?

I firmly believe in the separation of church and state. I think the Founding Fathers were onto something with that one, and it is absolutely unconstitutional. It is fine if the Church wants to talk about these issues within the context of a religious service, but it should absolutely not try to affect public policy.

And finally, what do you think about the fact that the number of Atheists seems to be rising in America, particularly among teenagers and young adults? Why do you think it is mostly the younger generations? Would you say TV shows such as Family Guy have anything to do with

it? And where you think this trend will lead? Can you imagine a godless America? Can you already see some changes in the society brought about by Atheism?

I cannot imagine a godless America. My concern about the “new Atheists” is that they will view their belief as a springboard for moral and ethical anarchy. For all of my issues with how I was raised, Christianity instilled a very strong sense of morality in me. As long as the ability to discern between “right” and “wrong”, moral and immoral, ethical and unethical, behavior is taught, I don’t see how a person’s religious, or non-religious, beliefs are relevant.

I often wonder what the long-term impact of television is on a generation’s views. I honestly don’t think any one, or two, television shows are informing the younger generation’s religious beliefs. I think that it may be a data point, but I think a bigger influence is the Internet. Younger generations are exposed to far more information than ever before, and they are forming their beliefs based on what is happening on a global stage. In the last couple of decades there have been several scandals within the Catholic Church, Islam has all but been demonized because of Jihadist and the events of 9-11, the Tea Party Christians are down right terrifying, trying to bring women’s rights over her own body back to the dark ages, then there is the Westboro Baptist Church (need I say more??), and constant fighting between the Israelis and Palestinians in the Gaza Strip is just as religious-based as it is over territory. All of this, and more, is enough to make any reasonable, quasi-intelligent, person question why they should embrace any religion at all.

Perhaps a positive change will be that as future generations turn away from religion there will be less social divisiveness and political discord? Maybe someday there will be one big “kum-ba-ya” moment and people will stop worrying over whether or not their religious beliefs are the “right” ones, and therefore stop trying to impose them on the rest of the world, and we can all just get along? We can only hope, right?